Bits and Bumps:
Understanding gender in contemporary physical comedy

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Exegesis

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Abstract

This research project investigates how gendered bodies perform physical comedy. According to the late Christopher Hitchens (2007) women are too concerned with the seriousness of their reproductive responsibility to make good comedy. If, as slapstick film director Mack Sennett once declared, the body of mother is too serious for pratfalls (Dreiser 1928), then the female body in the public realm is often situated as a trivial simulacrum: "[s]he might be a Booker Prize winning author, politician, scholar, miner or comedian, but let's cut to the important question: *what does she look like*"(Goldsworthy 2013, 22). This study, located in the field of practice-led research, challenges these notions of gender and comedy by producing a new theatrical physical comedy that features the work of both a female and a male performer, crafted so that the female performer is not merely a prop, but enjoys an equal share of the punch-lines.

This project makes an original contribution to knowledge by formulating a new method of understanding how the body operates in physical comedy. This method works by identifying five key registers in which the comic body can be situated in physical comedy. Further, the study identifies how gender challenges the operation of these registers. Most significantly, the research develops and demonstrates a three-tier process for a writer/director to manage the challenges of gender in a mainstage context.

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Thanks and love must also go to my family.

Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this document has not previously been submitted to meet requirements for an award at this, or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this document contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made.

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Keywords

The following is a list of keywords that appear within this thesis or are associated with the topic of this thesis. These keywords have been listed for cataloguing purposes.

Clown, feminist humour, gender, gendered bodies, new vaudeville, physical comedy.

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Key Terms

The following list defines the key terms used throughout this study. The discursive heritage of the terms is briefly indicated and the particular interpretation of this heritage for the research project is made clear.

CLOWN

The standard definition of clown refers to a performance persona that is other to normal humans, but yet connected to the audience (with no fourth wall) – a childlike, naive version of the performer (Peacock 2009; Wright 2006). The clown is in a constant state of wonder at the exigencies of living in the real world and humour is generated when the clown's limited understanding grapples with tacitly-understood principles of life on Earth, such as gravity. For the purposes of this study, however, the term clown is used interchangeably with physical comedian, or character. Throughout the performance practice the actors will play characters with some clown-like attributes, but who do not always play the simple, naive, audience-engaged persona most often found in circus or clown theatre. This broader definition is due to the specific form that the work is situated in, namely, new vaudeville.

GENDER

This term is acknowledged as contested, however for the purposes of the study, gender is understood through a sexual difference feminist lens. This conceptual frame posits that there is gendered difference amongst sexual beings, but this is an ongoing development or process rather than a permanent and ineluctable fact of physical sex characteristics (Tong 2008; Grosz 1994).

GENDERED BODIES

These are human bodies upon which gender has been ascribed through a complex series of processes as referred to above. The body in this conception is a "social and discursive object ... bound up in the order of desire, signification, and power" (Grosz 1994, 19).

MAINSTAGE

This term will be used throughout the study to designate a performance context that is distinguishable by its intended audience, nature of venue and level of professionalism. The intended audience can be described as the general public that may not be highly literate in performance forms or experienced in performance attendance. The venue is accessible and visible to that audience, indeed, the venue may be mediatised, and the performance may take place on television or film. The project is conducted as a piece of completely professional work, with all members of the creative team appropriately renumerated.

NEW VAUDEVILLE

New vaudeville, which as a term, emerged in the United States in the mid 1980s (Carlson 2004, 123) is related to vaudeville in that it is comprised of small routines utilising comedy, music, dance, magic and acrobatics (Cullen, Hackman and McNeilly 2007). However, like another more recently identified form – 'new circus' – it espouses a "modern ironic and reflexive consciousness of the performing act" (Carlson 2004, 122) and features small ensembles playing multiple roles presenting short routines that are thematically linked.

PHYSICAL COMEDY

This phrase refers to performance where the humour is generated primarily through the performer's body rather than through language. This form of comedy can operate on stage and screen but, clearly, not on radio. It can be found in a wide range of performance genres, including Commedia dell'Arte, vaudeville, circus, slapstick film, situation comedy and sketch comedy. A distinctive feature of the form is the use of lazzo, a term appropriated from Commedia dell'Arte referring to small units of comic action, often virtuosic, that do not advance the narrative.

SUCCESSFUL PERFORMANCE

For the purposes of this project, a performance is deemed successful if it is programmed in a mainstage venue (see definition above) and received positive audience response in the form of critical reviews.

1.0 Introduction

This research journey began in 1998, on a sunny Brisbane day on the Kidney Lawn, situated in the Gardens Point Campus of the Queensland University of Technology. I and my partner in comedy, Liz Skitch, were performing a street theatre act entitled *The Gooney Girls.* At one point during the half-hour show, we stripped off our frocks to reveal daggy, baggy underwear and exhorted the crowd to join in our chant: "Frock Swap! Frock Swap!" Whilst previous iterations of the performance had garnered their fair share of laughs, it was clear that today was going to be one of those difficult days where every second in performance seems like an hour.

The most challenging moment came midway through the stripping routine described above. A young couple sat eating their lunch at a great distance to our performance. They looked shocked. Then, slowly, carefully, the young woman put her hand up to cover the eyes of her boyfriend. What was she shielding him from? The sight of slightly wobbly female bodies? Despite our intention to poke mild fun at notions of female beauty, had the work been read as an unsuccessful attempt to titillate, and thus painful to watch? I compared her reaction to that which I had witnessed when my male colleagues performed their street shows, regularly removing their shirts to reveal slightly flabby bodies that engendered laughter rather than the mixture of fear and disgust displayed by this audience member.

In analysing this moment some fifteen years later as I engage in this doctoral study, I recognise in the actions of that young woman some of the "anxiety" that Judith Butler (1990) identifies in her seminal article which positions gender as a series of performative acts. In Butler's conception, this anxiety sits alongside the pleasure of gender performance, and reflects how society metes out "strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations" (1990, 282). Our attempt to deploy our gendered bodies in such an unwarranted (or at least unwanted) improvisation for comic effect had clashed with her understanding of what our gender performance should look like. It was as if, having read one performance – our gender – she was unable or unwilling to read another performance – comedy – in conjunction with it. However this unwillingness

to read multiple performances on the same body was clearly contextual; the routine had been well received in other performance venues and contexts such as the Zoo nightclub for an International Women's Day event or the Valley Mall for the Pride Festival. I wondered what would have to change to make this double performance more acceptable in an environment that was perhaps not so familiar with the joys associated with staging transgression.

Since that performance event, my practice as a writer/director/performer of physical comedy has developed and my understanding of how the body works in the comic moment has deepened. I have successfully employed physical comedy as a performer in a variety of contexts from a mainstream audience of several hundred in the Queensland Performing Arts Complex Playhouse (*The Venetian Twins* 2004), to a small inner-city crowd at Melbourne's Burlesque Bar (*Moulin Beige* 2012). As a writer/director, my work has been seen by thousands of young people across Australia and internationally (*The Clown from Snowy River* 2006–8, *Lily Can't Sleep* 2007-14, *Hurry up and Wait* 2010– 14). However, I feel the traces of that original anxiety lurking beneath my practice, even as it has grown. To articulate this vague disquiet is confronting, but necessary. It seems to be more difficult for me and my female colleagues to perform physical comedy than it is for our male peers, particularly in a mainstage context.

Research in the field supports my hypothesis regarding the challenges of comedy for women; scholarship around female comic performance is deeply concerned with this apparent difficulty. The discourse ranges from academic studies (Gilbert 2004; Hubbell 2002; Lavin 2004; Starcevich 2001), to articles in popular media (Hastings 2013; Brand 2009; Benedictus 2012) that repeatedly ask the question: "why are there not more women in comedy?" Most often, these studies and articles are focussed on stand-up comedy and use such methodological strategies as statistical analysis, case studies, interviews and analysis of scripted and live performance. The statistics do tell a story of exclusion and marginalisation, and explanations as to why this occurs can be revealing, as in this offering from comedy venue manager Darren Sanders in an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

> "Women are just not as funny, in the same way that guys aren't good at stripping." After a pause, he added: "I'm joking, they are funny." Mr Sanders said his audiences were more receptive to male comics. "When you talk to customers, they sort of feel men and women can both laugh at men," he said. "But when a woman is on stage you lose a percentage of that audience. I couldn't explain the reasons why." (Taylor 2012, 1)

Despite the fact that there are and always have been many physical comedians such as Lucille Ball (1930 – 70s), Jennifer Saunders (1980 – present) and Miranda Hart (2008–present) whose mainstage success counteracts Sanders' not-entirely-facetious statement, there is a need to explain the "reasons why" notions of difficulty and challenge seep into scholarly and popular debate around this topic. Thus the point where ideas of gender and of physical comedy intersect has become an "area of intense interest" of my artistic practice in David Fenton's (2012, 35) terms, which I have reframed as a "focus or research concern".

A discursive thread that runs through contemporary debate and critical analysis of gender and comedy further highlights the central themes in my research concern. The thread runs as follows: there was/is a crisis and a lack of women in comedy (mostly stand up), but that example A, B or C (citing whoever is popular at present) prove that this is in the past. Female comics (the majority of which, in the case of scholarly literature, are stand-ups) are often described as being at the vanguard of a successful new wave of female gendered artists (Moss 2013; Stanley 2008). Such claims, however, are undermined by the cyclic nature of these debates. In her comprehensive examination of women in comedy in the United States from the late 1950s to the present day, *We Killed* (2013), Yael Kohen acknowledges that "Ours isn't the first generation of LOL ladies, and it certainly wasn't the first time they've had to defend themselves against the *you're not funny insult"* (Kohen 2013, 5). Why, when successful female comedians keep proving themselves on the mainstage, does this "insult" keep recurring? Why is the female comic project so often characterised as being post-crisis? For the advancement of comedy scholarship, I have attempted to understand and explain why, and for the sake of my own practice in physical comedy and for the broader community of performing artists, I have aimed to discover and document methods of practice that address the problem.

Thus, this doctoral project appropriates Shomit Mitter's research imperative with which he interrogated the practice of such iconic directors as Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski as he sought "to ask what ambitions these directors have for their theatres, what problems these have entailed for their actors and what solutions they have been able to offer in workshop."(Mitter 1992, 2). From my own particular research concern, then, and with a clear ambition for the kind of theatrical performance I want to create, the research question that drives this study was formulated:

How can a writer/director facilitate successful female performance of physical comedy in a mainstage context?

This driving research question was broken down into sub-questions that focused the various research tasks within the study.

> *What are the strategies that physical comedians use?*
>
> *How does gender affect the performance of these strategies?*
>
> *What strategies can female physical comedians use to overcome the challenges of gender?*
>
> *How can a writer/director facilitate the use of these strategies in a mainstage context?*

Answering these research questions resulted in the development of a new framework for understanding the strategies that physical comedians use and an understanding of how gender challenges how these strategies operate. The study then identified and developed new strategies for female physical comedians to overcome the challenges of gender and demonstrated these in action in a mainstage context, via an original theatrical work, *The Furze Family Variety Hour.* This project did not seek to provide a detailed analysis of the work of artists, historical or contemporary, but rather to investigate how my own practice, based in live theatrical performance, could embody the research outcomes.

This exegesis provides an analysis of *The Furze Family Variety Hour*, thus representing a partial presentation of the findings of the study overall. Following this introductory chapter, a contextual review defines the conceptual framework for the research project. This framework is comprised of a review of the form of physical comedy and an analysis of how gender affects this. Data gathered via semi-structured interviews with key practitioners is integrated into the framework, as is an analysis of how some successful female physical comedians overcome the challenges of gender.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological strategies that were used for this study, including the interpretive lens and research methods. A model of research as conversation is proposed. The exegesis then focuses on the creative practice cycles that occurred over the life of the research project, briefly describing the processes, and presenting the emergent findings from these research sites. These findings fed into the development of a new model of writer/directorial process that was utilised to create the examinable work. This process, which can be illustrated by an inverted pyramid comprising three modes of directorial practice: understanding, de-mystification and enabling, is explicated in Chapter Five.

New knowledge has been generated via three key findings for the study overall, which are presented in Chapter Six. The first major finding generated a new framework for understanding the strategies that physical comedians use. Appropriating a term from Michel Foucault (1977), I have defined five "registers" of the body that are utilised in physical comedy: the grotesque body, the body in disguise, the body as machine, the body in relationship with inanimate objects and the body in the social world. With this framework in place, I have identified that the grotesque and disguised registers are the key sites for writer/directors of physical comedy to overcome the challenges of gender. This conception of the female grotesque body modulates Mary Russo's understanding of the efficacy of this trope in her seminal text *The Female Grotesque* (1995). The final finding identifies the importance of the specific female body in the process of creating and performing physical comedy. The concluding chapter makes a case for the significance of these findings, both for my own praxis and for that of other artist/researchers in this field.

2.0 Contextual review – conceptual framework

2.1 Introduction

This contextual review provides a conceptual framework for the study. Using the research sub-questions to interrogate extant literature, I have developed a method to conceptualise the strategies used by physical comedians. The framework then outlines three broad factors which combine to elucidate why physical comedy is often more challenging for women to perform than for men, analysing literature and data generated via interviews with contemporary practitioners. These factors, termed challenges of gender, are key to understanding the knowledge gap that this contextual review identifies. Given these challenges, how can female physical comedians produce successful performance – what are the specific strategies they use to overcome such challenges? Furthermore, how can a writer/director facilitate these strategies when creating performance for a mainstage audience?

Throughout the review, a variety of sources are cited, including written texts, live performances and interviews with key practitioners in this field. Although this study is focused upon the practice of live performance, concentration of scholarship and the generally greater accessibility of filmed work have led me to cite some film theory and to reference filmed performances to elucidate my arguments.

2.2 Comedy and the body

Although it could be argued that the scholarship of comedy is primarily concerned with how it manifests in literature, the primacy of the body to this form is undeniable. For modern scholars, Mikhail Bahktin and his notion of Carnival in this body-centred understanding of comedy (Bahktin 1968) have become a ubiquitous launching point for inquiry, so much so that Russo (1995) coined the phrase the "carnival of theory" (54) to describe the concatenating streams of thought reflecting, refracting, emanating, building upon and consciously diverging from Bahktin's theories (Eco 1984; Stallybrass and White 1986; Davis 1975; Kristeva and Roudiez 1980). It is rare for commentators of the comic to move from notions of embodiment to a more specific examination of what the body actually does in the comic moment. Those who do are most often focussed upon practice in slapstick

film culture in the early 20th century – the Golden Age of comedy (Agee 1958; Dale 2000) – and the work of specific performer/writer/directors in this period. In his influential essay on *Comedy's Greatest Era*, for example, James Agee (1958) details the most effective "gags" of the silent comedy masters: Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Harry Langdon and Buster Keaton. He identifies how films were created using an established collection of stock routines, "fine clichés from the language of silent comedy" (Agee 1958, 3), but that what distinguished the "masters" was the idiosyncratic inflection they applied to the stock gags.

Following Agee, other scholars of this era (Carroll 1991, 2007; Crafton 1995) present taxonomies of routines, such as Alan Dale's (2000), for whom physical comedy ("slapstick" is his preferred nomenclature) has an existential dimension:

> […] slapstick is a fundamental, universal, and eternal response to the fact that life is physical. Of the two components, body and soul, we have empirical proof of the first alone. It's the body that we can *see* interacting with physical forces, and objects, and our intense exasperation that this interaction doesn't run smoother ... stimulates the urge to tell a story in a slapstick mode. (Dale 2000, 11)

He frames slapstick as a ritual form whose purpose is to come to terms with embodiment, operating in contrast to other body-taming rituals, such as Christianity (indeed all major religions take a prohibitive approach to bodily urges) and pagan Olympianism, which aims to celebrate what physicality can achieve. Slapstick acknowledges, celebrates and ritualistically (thus cathartically) foregrounds the limitations of our physicality and in so doing, reconciles us to it (Dale 2000, 14). Clearly, in this conception, slapstick acts are not transgressive (more on this theme later), but are rather enablers for the construction of a certain kind of bodied subjectivity, which as Andrew Stott (2005, 86) explains, cannot be characterised as "an authentic ... and unmediated experience of our material selves, but rather a discovery of the body through the contravention of civility."

On the landscape of contemporary physical comedy beyond traditional slapstick, the figures of Jacques Lecoq and his erstwhile pupil Philippe Gaulier cast long shadows of influence. Their practice in physical comedy is popularly condensed under the single term "clown". For Lecoq, the clown is a physical embodiment of Hobbes' "sudden

glory": "[t]he clown is the person who flops, who messes up his turn, and, by so doing, gives his audience a sense of superiority" (Lecoq, Carasso and Lallias 2000, 156). Gaulier's clown is in a perpetual state of bewilderment regarding the vicissitudes of life in the physical world (Gaulier 2000; Wright 2006). In her 2009 analysis of contemporary clown performance, *Serious Play*, Louise Peacock demonstrates the significance of these two teachers in the work (or, more aptly, the play) of such modern clowns as Slava Polunin and Angela De Castro. She classifies clowning routines into types:

> [...] 'interruption of ceremony', 'subversion and parody', 'physical skill' (acrobatics, juggling, contortion, high wire), 'incompetence', 'interaction with objects', 'interaction with other clown', 'status', 'food' and, more recently, 'the exploration of the human condition'. (Peacock 2009, 23)

Whilst Peacock's work is exhaustive, its focus is specific to live clown performance rather than general physical comedy which occurs in a variety of media and genres. In common with some other scholars, such as Ronald Jenkins (1988), the study involves descriptions of specific routines rather than strategies, which are the focus of this research.

2.3 Registers of physical comedy

The various bodily strategies that are regularly employed by physical comedians can be clustered around five broadly recognisable "registers" of the body, to borrow a term from Michel Foucault (Foucault and Sheridan 1977, 136). Where Foucault identifies a useful body and an intelligible body, in physical comedy I have defined a grotesque body, a disguised body, a body-as-machine, a body relative to inanimate objects and a body deployed in the social world. Naturally in a single routine or a longer performance work, these registers overlap and are not mutually exclusive, but rather are connected systems or frames of physicality that help to define what happens to the body in the comic moment. The use of male-gendered pronouns throughout this analysis is deliberate, foregrounding the second part of the contextual framework.

2.3.1 The grotesque body

Here the term grotesque is used in the Bahktinian (1968) sense, where the elements of the so called lower bodily stratum are foregrounded. This register finds humour in the ineluctable urges of that stratum – the hungry stomach, the lusty genitals and the needing-to-be-voided bowel and bladder. Performance in this mode showcases the "uncivilised" body's struggle with discipline of social conditioning (Foucault and Sheridan 1977), hence the use of nudity and bodily functions.

> It is an image of impure corporeal bulk with its orifices (mouth, flared nostrils, anus) yawning wide and its lower regions (belly, legs, feet, buttocks and genitals) given priority over its upper regions (head, 'spirit', reason). (Stallybrass and White 1986, 9)

The "flared nostrils" of anger symbolise the use of comic violence, a key tool in early vaudeville and slapstick cinema. Comic duo Weber and Fields, practitioners in this period, produced an analysis of physical comedy that emphasised the importance of violence in eliciting laughter (Glenn 2000; Jenkins 1992). Comic violence must occur to another body – Buster Keaton ruefully acknowledged that "an audience will laugh at things happening to you, and they certainly wouldn't laugh if it happened to them" (Feinstein 2007, 135) – and it must be without real consequences; the bodies must recover almost immediately.

Characters of the Commedia dell'Arte frequently operate in the grotesque register. This highly physical form of theatrical comedy is distinguished by the use of set pieces of comic physical business, or *lazzi*, and stock characters based on archetypes, such as Punchinello, ruled by his stomach, or El Capitano, led by his groin into comic scenarios. It is in the use of the grotesque and disguised bodies that contemporary physical comedians most recognisably embody the tradition of the ancient fool, or clown who "resist[ed] the civilising process, celebrating social transgression, fluid identity and bodily pleasure" (Karnick and Jenkins 1995, 156). Indeed, fluidity is key to understanding the grotesque body as it is "not a closed system defined by clear limits, but a body that reaches out beyond its boundaries and interacts with the world on a sensual level" (Stott 2005, 89).

2.3.2 The disguised body

Closely related to the grotesque body, this register situates the body in parodic mode, which amuses us, says teacher and clown, John Wright (2006, 260), when the physical imitation calls to mind but does not perfectly mimic, the target, making it somehow deformed, a less perfect copy of the original. Through a combination of costume – in carnivalesque mode, this was often mask – and bodily distortion, the body is presented as other – larger or smaller, stronger or weaker, fatter or thinner – than "life". The politics of this register can be confronting, as historically the grotesque parody was performed by those with actual physical and mental disabilities, the *bouffon* or buffoons as Gaulier (2000) and Wright (2006) term them respectively, who were traditionally granted one day in the carnival to parody their quotidian masters before returning to their "rightful" place as despised outcasts of society: "[w]ith the uninhibited cruelty of former times, people laughed freely at cripples, paralytics, amputees, midgets, monsters, the deaf and the mute, the blind, the poor, and the crazy" (Grotjahn 1957, 91).

Both the grotesque and the disguised body stage a functional transgression of taboo, where the "ribald humour... functions as a therapy for key collective and individual anxieties including castration anxiety, fear of impotence and so on" (Cheesemond 2007, 11). Cross-dressing exemplifies the parodic and paradoxical performance of this fear, as Butler tersely reminds us: "the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence" (1990, 278). Thus, it is important that the comic fiction is clear, that the mask is acknowledged – Dame Edna Everage's contralto voice hints at a masculine break and Auntie Jack's[1] hairy legs peep out from under her skirts.

2.3.3 The body as machine

Physical comedy, maintains Henri Bergson (1900, 3), is most potent when the body is least human, that is, when it can be imbued with the rigidity of a machine, forsaking

[1] Grahame Bond's transvestite creation from ABCTV's *The Aunty Jack Show* (1972-3)

the fluidity of the natural body[2] and maintaining its trajectory with mechanic observance when impeded, say, by a slippery banana peel. This is the comedy that transpires when the body, for a brief moment, loses the sentience needed to negotiate life's obstacles. Like an electric toy car whirling its wheels impotently after banging into the wall, the physical comedian as machine cannot appropriately adjust the pattern of his behaviour when the circumstances change. Wright (2006) describes how he and his students attempted to embody this register in the most literal sense – approaching a banana skin and slipping whilst maintaining complete mechanical rigidity – and the results substantiated Bergson's claim: the more rigid their bodies under duress, the bigger the laugh. This comic register can also operate at a gestural level, when the comedian takes the most difficult, or least efficient route from point A to point B – turning his whole body, rather than his head, or tracing a huge arc with a soup spoon or wine glass causing "a rupture in the expected link between physical effort and result" (Dale 2000, 4).

2.3.4 The body in relation to inanimate objects

Dale (2000, 10) highlights the "bewilderment and exasperation" the hero experiences when dealing with the seeming perversity of inanimate objects. Perverse, because the objects introduce a complication that must be dealt so that the narrative can continue, and seeming because we as audience are smugly aware that, despite the anthropomorphic vicious agenda that the (hilariously) enraged hero ascribes to the banana skin, or heavy piano, or sticky glue, that the thing is just that – a thing – and that we, the sentient beings are actually in control. In this way, humans can assert their animate physical superiority by playing with moments when the tables are (sometimes literally) turned: "[b]y examining the identity and utility of things and playing with the space they occupy, their dimensions, properties and cultural significance, the body's relationship to the external world is made strange." (Stott 2005, 94).

[2] Here Bergson ascribes the natural body with elasticity and an inability to be iterated that contrasts with the endless repetitive automaton.

Noël Carroll (2007, 6) links this register with the former – "body as machine" – via Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1962) concept of bodied intentionality, using Buster Keaton's 1926 film *The General* as an exemplar where the comedian

> [...] underscores bodily intelligence as a human norm by subtracting it from those situations where his character fares badly in his attempts to influence the physical world and by superadding it on those occasions where the character has the material world do his bidding. (Carroll 2007, 6)

When the material world is at the comedian's bidding, objects can inspire as well as infuriate, as demonstrated by Jerry Lewis' interactions with a baton or an office chair (*The Bellboy* (1960), *The Errand Boy* (1961)); they have a magnetic quality that inexorably draws the body to them in order to showcase chaotic virtuosity and/ or virtuosic chaos. Objects can also be used in what Carroll (1991) describes as "mimed metaphors" and/ or "object analogs", where the object is either used so that it is metaphorically equated with another object or simply repurposed for comic effect.

2.3.5 The body in the social world

Kristine Karnick and Henry Jenkins make the distinction between "clown" and "comedian" physical comedy, positing that the clown exists, in a sense, outside of society in their own world, whilst the comedian makes "mistakes and mishaps arising from efforts to conform to social roles" (Karnick and Jenkins 1995, 156). This register is best exemplified by the glorious oeuvre of Rowan Atkinson, in particular the hapless Mr. Bean. Wright (2001) structures an exercise to teach the use of this register entitled "The Clown in the Real World". In the prototype exercise, the clown has an important job interview but has no idea what to do. His friend (also a clown) assures him that *he* knows, and will hide himself in the interview room, out of sight of the employer, but so that his hapless friend can see him and copy his movements, since successful interviews are all about "the right body language". Here the focal point for the laughter is the juxtaposition of the absurd (since without a context) physical turns of the clown with the socially correct behaviour of the potential employer. It is significant that the scene is funnier when the straight performer tries to normalise the clown's behaviour whilst attempting to disguise their own dismay at the situation– we see shock in their eyes, but they don't laugh, treating the clown's antics as a form of (embarrassing) disability.

2.4 Challenges of gender

Many theories of comedy fail to fully investigate the implications of gender when seeking to provoke Thomas Hobbes' (1651) "sudden glory" of laughter[3]. Kathleen Rowe's critique of Northrop Frye in this regard is applicable to many commentators who "seek a common ground of shared desire, rather than to investigate the divisions which make such common ground difficult, if not impossible to achieve" (Rowe 1995a, 48). As with so many fields of human endeavour and their concomitant fields of scholarship, the presumption of a non-gendered discourse is a fallacy. Regina Barreca (1988, 10) puts it baldly: "the history of comedy has in fact been the history of male comedy." Comedy's historic binaries[4] can both be seen to exclude the female: she is not serious enough to joke at the life-and-death stuff and not enough of a social threat to need the pressure-valve of anarchic release. Viewing the scholarship of comedy through the feminist lens of this study highlights how gender affects the performance of physical comedy by creating significant challenges for female physical comedians. These challenges can be categorised as the neutral fallacy, the heavy body and the ideological clash.

2.4.1 The neutral fallacy

Peter Brook's foundational text *The Empty Space* (1968) begins with an oft-quoted aphorism:

> I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged. (Brook 1968, 11)

Over forty years later British stand-up comic Catie Wilkins describes in an interview how an M.C. once introduced a fellow comic by saying: "this next act is a woman" (Moon 2012, 219). The theory may have changed – such sexist language as Brook's would be almost unthinkable now – but the reality of performance practice remains

[3] Hobbes conceives laughter as a response to perceived weaknesses in others.

[4] The binaries referred to here are dichotomous understandings of comedy as subversive or conservative. The form can be seen as a means to critique and overthrow power structures or a deliberate hegemonic device to manage anarchic tendencies in the populace by giving transgressive behaviour a sanctioned outlet: "while a custard pie may not seem like much of a weapon, humor has, in fact, historically been understood as an effective means of social control as well as a way of commenting on and changing perceived flaws in society" (Wagner 2011, 36). This is explicated in greater detail later in the conceptual framework.

the same. The atomic unit of theatre is the movement of a man in empty space. If something different occurs –"the next act is a woman" – attention must be drawn. Female is used as an adjective that changes the neutral subject which, on investigation, is clearly predicated as male. As in the context of the visual arts where:

> [w]omen artists are frequently seen to be incapable of making "objective" statements in the same way as their male counterparts. Interpretation is bound up with the subjective and the personal, with the experiences of being bound within a body marked female. (Ashby 2000, 46)

So too in comedy, the prevailing belief is that "female comedians only discuss 'women's' themes ... whereas male topics are thought to be unbounded and therefore to have universal appeal" (Stott 2005, 99). It is this conceptual conflation of the terms "universal" and "male" which challenges the female comic project.

Seen in this context, Lecoq's ideal of the "neutral body/mask" as a basis for building physical comedy is revealed as highly questionable.

> When a student has experienced this neutral starting point his [sic] body will be freed, like a blank page on which drama [and comedy] can be inscribed. (Lecoq, Carasso and Lallias 2000, 38)

The problematic nature of this neutrality can be illustrated by a basic unit of physical comedy; the banana-peel slip. Laughter is generated when the rhythm of the hero's journey is ruptured by the slippery banana skin, but it is louder when the hero has more to lose by the slip – a pompous businessman elicits more humour than a young boy. As Dale (2000, 3) explains; "the essence of a slapstick gag is a physical assault on, or collapse of, the hero's dignity; as a corollary, the loss of dignity by itself can result in our identifying with the victim." However, this hypothesis presumes that "dignity" can be located and fixed outside of gender, which feminist theory contests. When the hero is gendered as female, her dignity is fundamentally differently constructed.

Whether women can perform physical comedy at all, let alone as effectively as men, has been contentious. Indeed, many scholars analyse what makes bodies funny by invoking a putative non-gendered body that is apparently less accessible for the female clown:

> For a start, they said, the clown is androgynous and it is impossible for a woman to be androgynous. She carries her sex around with her as a constant. (Broadway 2005, 76)

When discussing early slapstick cinema, Kristen Wagner notes that comedy's inherent aggression was seen to be at odds with the prevailing ideal of passive, nurturing femininity (2011, 37), a view with much traction in performance and literary criticism (Stott 2005; Jenkins 1992). Dale's (2000)analysis (as cited earlier) of this period is revealingly titled *Comedy is a Man in Trouble*. The important figures in his audit are all male: Buster Keaton, the Keystone Cops, Harold Lloyd, writer/ director Preston Sturges, and of course, Charlie Chaplin. Lucy Fischer (1991, 64) observes that Mae West is the notable exception in this boys' club. Henry Jenkins (1992, 256) explains this phenomenon by invoking Freud's theory of the joke:

> This denial of female jocularity was probably tied to the dominant comic tradition's function as a release of male anxieties and fear; a laughing and joking woman posed a potential new threat to male authority and masculine dignity, intensifying the tensions masculine-centred comedy sought to resolve.

Rowe (1995a, 45) makes the point that although the centrality of sex to comedy – part of its "overall attack on repression and a celebration of bodily pleasure, a means of connection within the space of family and the time of generation" – would seem to align the comedy project with the feminine, that this has rarely the been case in mainstream narrative comedy, or indeed, physical comedy. Indeed, Fischer (1991) goes so far as to accuse cinematic comedy of "matricide" to explain the elision where the figure of woman, or more specifically in Fischer's analysis – mother – should be. If the female body does appear, it lacks comic agency, being positioned as "the reward that awaits the hero, or in jokes as the primary locus of taboo" (Stott 2005, 97).

It is easy to dismiss such analysis as referring to a less enlightened age, however the intransigence of this perspective is exemplified in a now (in)famous article featured in *Vanity Fair* magazine, where the late Christopher Hitchens provocatively analysed "*Why women aren't funny"* (2007). His answer cited Kipling's *Female of the Species* and the putative seriousness of women's reproductive responsibilities: "for women the question of funniness is essentially a secondary one. They are innately aware of a

higher calling that is no laughing matter" (2007, 2). Apparently, when you're caring for a baby, you simply don't have time to be funny. This inscription and reading of the female body points to the second challenge of gender.

2.4.2 The heavy body

As the aforementioned registers of comedy demonstrate, many of the strategies employed for physical humour temporarily subvert the systems of power/control that operate on the body, to extrapolate from Foucault's (1977) analysis. However these systems of power are gendered, as Simone de Beauvoir aphoristically (but no less powerfully) understood even before Foucault began to systematise power and knowledge: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (Beauvoir 1953, 295). Such a becoming is akin to taking on weight: "her [the human female's] lot is heavier than other females" (Beauvoir 1953, 64). Thus the human female body is a densely encoded and contested site of knowing and being, as Elizabeth Grosz explores in her useful treatise on *Volatile Bodies* (1994) and, most pertinently, Susan Bordo in *Unbearable Weight* (1993). This heaviness encompasses not only female bodied subjectivity – in other words, *being* in a body marked female – but how the female body is *read* – what it means to an audience. For Hitchens, as seen above, the body of woman can only be read as the essentially un-funny, life and death-dealing womb.

Perhaps Julia Kristeva's (1982) celebrated concept of abjection provides the most effective framework for understanding the weight that impedes any reading of the female comic body. For Kristeva, abjection signifies the subject's struggle to come to terms with physical embodiment and manifests in revulsion of bodily excreta, of corpses, of blood.

> Excrement ... stand[s] for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. Menstrual blood ... threatens ... the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference. (Kristeva 1982, 71)

The abject permeates borders that divide binary opposites, and is therefore capable of inciting horror, as in this description of the living being's encounter with the lifeless corpse:

> [...] in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders ...

> It is not the lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. (Kristeva 1982, 4)

Analysis of James Joyce's rhetorical landscapes further crystallises how the

> [...] feminine body, the maternal body, in its most un-signifiable, unsymbolizable aspect, shores up, in the individual, the fantasy of the loss in which he is engulfed or becomes inebriated, for want of the ability to name an object of desire. (Kristeva 1982, 20)

The connection here between the corpse and the maternal/feminine body is their inability to be signified, to be matched, they become an "'other' without a name, which subjective experience confronts when it does not stop at the appearance of its identity" (Kristeva 1982, 59). What, in this paradigm, are the implications for the female comic performer? Firstly, if the female body is ascribed/ positioned as abject, that is, between borders, liminal, unfixed, then how can it be signified in any genre? In this sense the female body jostles with, rather than submits to Aristotelian mimesis. Of course, this dilemma was for centuries resolved, in part, by theatrical transvestism that saw the feminine constructed as a mask (both literal and figurative) worn over a real male body (Ferris 1998, 166).

Secondly, amongst the specifics of physical comedy is the notion of recognition; for us to appreciate the twist that makes us "reinterpret all previous facts" (Ramachandran in Wright 2006, 6), we must be safe in our knowledge of those facts, in our impregnable subject/ object relationship which abjection disrupts. Dale (2000, 3) puts it simply: "[c]omedies have to stay close to life in some respects to get at what makes us anxious and convert it to laughter". It is this foundational imperative, staying "close to life", which becomes problematic when the female body is represented in the comic mode. In short, the female body means too much, or not enough, or both and that excess or lack of meaning delays, disrupts and derails the comic moment.

The female comic body is thus slightly blurred, out of focus. We can't quite see her, or place her comfortably in our comic ontology. Dale's analysis (2000) of Mabel Normand's physical comedy exemplifies this. Normand, of one of the most celebrated female slapstick artists of Agee's Golden Age of comedy (1958), a star of

the Keystone movies and the subsequent Mack and Mabel films, was famously an inspiration for Charlie Chaplin (Scheinmann 2013, 2), however her comic turns apparently never reach the iconic heights of her mentee and certainly her legacy is negligible in comparison. Here Dale compares the two comedians' lazzo in the movie *Mabel's Married Life*.

> Mabel re-enters for some more tumbles at the end, but she doesn't have the same clarity in the slapstick that Chaplin has. Her pratfalls aren't physically characteristic, as even the dummy's are. (Dale 2000, 103)

The key word in this analysis is "clarity". Despite her centrality to the comic world – she is no mere prize for the pratfalling hero, but an active participant in the slapstick – for Dale, her comic body is not as clear, and hence, ultimately, as successful as Chaplin's or, indeed as the lifeless mannequin featured in the film's climactic sequence, which sees Chaplin and Normand engage in a punch up with a bottom-heavy mannequin that swings back when hit, knocking each of the real bodies in the scene to the ground. By unfavourably comparing Normand's performance to the mannequin, Dale invokes body-as-machine register explicated earlier and unconsciously privileges the male body. For Dale, Normand's body cannot access the mechanical register that this slapstick moment requires. Her gender problematises her comic performance, jarring the reception of her body, causing a rupture in the timing of the gags. And in comedy, timing is everything.

There are more specific difficulties for the female physical comedian. Human defilement – excrement and menstrual blood – is the abject in material form, around which taboo ("what makes us anxious") and its symbolic counter-part, ritual are constructed, and for Kristeva, both "stem from the *maternal* and/or the feminine, of which the maternal is the real support" (1982, 71). She evidences this point by noting that the initial proscription of excremental freedom, that is, the actual/ corporeal (not symbolic) ordering of clean/ unclean bodily sites and functions, is a maternal one (1982, 71-2). However, whilst these taboos might well emanate from the same source, their powers of generating horror vary widely. John Limon (2000) and Rachel Lee (2004) utilise the notion of the abject to understand the apparent transgression inherent in stand-up comedy. In this form of comic performance the abject is redeployed from despised limen-dweller to star performer, and this is true,

to an extent, of physical comedy, particularly when it is operating in the grotesque register, indeed Stott asserts that "[t]he grotesque could be described as an embodiment of the abject" (2005, 87). Bare bottoms, flatulence, diarrhoea and constipation have all been grist to the comic mill in varying degrees, but the slapstick hero/clown never gets accidentally splattered in menstrual blood. It seems there are some horrors too powerful to be converted to laughter.

Does it follow, then, that Hitchens (2007) is correct in his analysis? Are the womb and all its apparent appurtenances of blood and pain essentially un-funny? When performance artist Carolee Schneemann slowly pulled a scroll from her vagina the project was political, transformative, religious or titillating, depending on your frame of reference (Ashby 2000; Fortier 1997; Schneider 1997) but no one suggested it might be funny. In contrast, Schneemann's male contemporaries were able to foreground their own phalluses with a sense of joy (Schneider 1997, 40).

Mack Sennett, iconic performer/director in slapstick cinema, invoked this apparent womb-fear when he maintained in a famous interview with Theodor Dreiser that "no joke about a mother ever gets a laugh" but old maids could be subjected to "anything this side of torture and [still] get a laugh" (Dreiser 1928, 186-8). In the slapstick film context, the prohibition on mother-jokes extended to the treatment of the young heroine – putative mother of the hero's children (Dale 2000, 95). This is because "physical comedy itself is seen as a form of impurity, as if pratfalls, even though at the level of character and story they are clearly unintentional, imply that the heroine is altogether too physically available" (Dale 2000, 101). In an interview with Studs Terkel, Buster Keaton was strong in his conviction that there were limits even in the anarchic, consequence-free world of slapstick.

> [...] there are just certain people you just don't hit with a pie. That's all there is to it. .... If I had a *grande dame* who is dogging it, putting it on. She's a grey-haired woman but she was so overbearing and everything else that the audience would like to hit her, then you could hit her with a pie and they'd laugh their heads off. But if she was a legitimate – an old lady and a sincere character – you wouldn't dare hit her. (Terkel 2007, 120)

Whilst Keaton makes no mention of the marital status of the fictional overbearing *grande dame* or the sincere old lady, the key word here is "legitimate". If we accept

Keaton's statement about the "legitimacy" of characters disqualifying them from being pie-in-face victims and then compare this with the aforementioned saw from Mack Sennett regarding what one could "do" to female characters in a slapstick setting there is an interesting conclusion to be drawn. The body of mother is too serious to engage in slapstick, unlike the body of an unmarried older woman. Ergo, an old maid – a woman who has not used her uterus for the function it was intended – is illegitimate and insincere, and a worthy target for pies. The sincerity or otherwise of a female body is thus predicated upon her uterus and its uses; the young heroine's "availability" through pratfalls compromised the sanctity of her womb, poking fun at what must remain sacred.

If the female body is not performing mother, that is, if she is situated in a public rather than private/ familial frame, another gendered performance threatens her comic project: the performance (or otherwise) of beauty. At the turn of the last century critics saw "female comic performance as a problem to be analysed, as a manifestation to be dreaded and pitied, as a detraction from the possibilities of feminine charm and beauty" (Jenkins 1992, 248). Situating beauty and funniness as mutually exclusive is a recurring trope in humour scholarship, as Hannah Ballou (2013) notes. Indeed, as is explored in greater detail below, many female practitioners of physical comedy have based their craft upon this assumption; Phyllis Diller was sure that "it helps a stand-up comic to have something wrong – to either have buck teeth, no chin, weigh five hundred pounds, have funny hair, or be too skinny or too tall or too something" (Kohen 2013, 16).

However, this self-conscious dichotomising of the performances of beauty and comedy places the female comic body in a double bind. If she is beautiful, she cannot be funny; if she is not, funny she may be, but how seriously can she be taken as a woman? In an analysis of contemporary Hollywood comedy, Tad Friend (2011) cites producers who claim that feminine vanity proscribes female funniness while simultaneously insisting that the lead female in a comedy must be "adorable". In an interview, contemporary British stand-up Jo Brand describes her perception of how her body is read throughout her performance:

> I think that the fact that you're a woman means that as soon as you appear on a stage, you're being assessed by the men for your potential attractiveness. That is infused through society so many times over that it's not even worth mentioning. (Sobott-Mogwe 1999, 138)

Two contemporary comic performances that literally place sexual organs centrestage, provide an illustration of how gendered difference can affect the choices performers (and critics) make when staging and reading bodies. The light-heartedly lewd *Puppetry of the Penis* which features men manipulating their genitals into various shapes is described as a "boys' bedroom prank into a theatrical extravaganza, celebrating with tongue-in-cheek innocence the flexibility of the phallus" (Sharp 2003). In contrast, Adrienne Truscott's *Asking for It*, in which the New York-based performer gives a stand-up comedy routine naked from the waist down, is positioned as funny, but with a serious intent: "[t]here is a point to this provocation ... disguising a steely agenda beneath a charming layer of fluff and, yes, jokes" (Jones 2013). The difference between the intended function of both works is marked. *Puppetry of the Penis* operated as a simple exchange of bodily acts operating in a permanent present tense: we do, you laugh, transaction over. *Asking for It* was temporally fluid, part of a movement that did something to the audience and in turn inspired the audience to do something.

Identifying this difference in function leads us to the final challenge of gender.

2.4.3 The ideological clash

This challenge can be understood through what Judith Wilt (1980, 173) has described as the "collision between comedy and feminism". The contours of this collision trace a division amongst comedy scholars around the question of whether comedy is inherently conservative or subversive. This question uncovers a "tension ... [which] runs throughout discussions of the carnivalesque" (Karnick 1995, 270) as to the purpose of transgression in comedy. In the conservative model of comedy (Eco 1984; Stallybrass and White 1986), the superstructure that enforces the subjugation of the many by the few is understood to be impregnable, whilst the seeming anarchy of carnival provokes transgressions from the status quo that are manageable and contained (Karnick 1995, 267). Frye (1957) most notably emphasised comedy's function in providing a *temporary* retreat to another

dimension with an inevitable return to a community made whole again. In psychoanalytical terms, Sigmund Freud (1928) conceives humour as liberating, but momentarily so, with wit functioning as an "outlet for aggressive tendencies" (3) that preserves normal psycho-social behaviours. Extrapolating from this position, it could be argued that for these critics, comedy depends for its existence on the continuing context of "normalcy", without which, there can be no deviancy. John Morreall's "pleasant psychological shift"(1983, 249) requires an inalienable and grounded starting position else the "shift" is meaningless – like running on sand or a punch line without a set-up. Kristine Karnick and Henry Jenkins use the anthropological research of Mary Douglas to conclude that "jokes can allow a public airing of transgressive views... only where these alternatives are already gaining some modicum of social acceptance" (Karnick 1995, 270).

The subversive model of comedy (Davis 1975; Rowe 1995b; Russo 1995) understands transgression in comedy as being purposefully anarchic, a tool in the fight against patriarchal, colonial and racist agendas, and it is this model that is most often utilised when scholars analyse comedy created by women:

> It has been frequently argued by theorists of women's comedy that men, as those traditionally in power, use humor to vent dissatisfaction but ultimately to preserve things as they are, whereas women use humor to shake things up. (Finney 1994, 9)

Female-authored comedy is underscored with the rage of the oppressed; its aim is to critique the system from an acknowledged outsider position, as Barreca concludes (1988, 6), when introducing and summarising essays on women's humour:

> It would appear from these studies that women who create comedy do so in order to intrude, disturb and disrupt; that comedy constructed by women is linked to aggression and to the need to break free of socially and culturally imposed restraints. ... anger and comedy are present as interlocking forces in many women's texts.

When scholarship moves from literature to female comic performance, purposeful transgression is still the focal theme, especially as regards content. Such studies (Hubbell 2002; Lavin 2004; Rowe 1995b; Starcevich 2001) are primarily concerned with stand-up comic performance. Perhaps most relevant for this discussion of physical comedy is Wagner's investigation of women in early slapstick cinema, where

she argues that female comedians of this era were using their fictitious comic roles to change expectations of "real life" social roles for women.

> In many ways, comedy is an ideal genre for women to push boundaries and challenge traditional gender roles, as the genre has long been used as a means of masking transgression and of rendering acceptable a wide range of behaviours. (Wagner 2011, 35)

It seems that for these critics, it is not enough for female comedians to be funny – they must also be attacking the patriarchy. Dominica Radulescu's (2008) analysis of Caterina Biancolelli's celebrated performance of the trickster maid Columbina in seventeenth century Commedia dell'arte performance is a case in point. Biancolelli's performance was full of verve and wit but Radulescu focuses her scholarship upon how this performance operated to overthrow the tyranny of patriarchal gendered roles.

Mary Russo, in her comprehensive analysis of the female grotesque, sees this carnivalesque and thus comic figure as a liberating force; "the very structure for rethinking the grand abstraction of "liberation" for women" (Russo 1995, 13). She reviews Bahtkin's analysis of the grotesque female comic body as exemplified by the Kerch terracotta figurines of senile, pregnant hags (1995, 63) and asks, provocatively, "Why *are* these old hags laughing?" Here, she is calling for a new understanding of the liberating power of carnivalesque laughter: "dialogical laughter ... with a new social subjectivity" (1995, 73). In a similar fashion does Rachel Lee (2004, 124-5) situate the "heroic pedagogy" of Margaret Cho's stand-up comedy performance as it foregrounds the unruly, uncontainable "leaky" borders that separate (or not, as the case may be) races, bodies and genders. This heroism is apparently staged on behalf of the oppressed others – Cho is the vanguard for a new, less-sexist (and racist) world. It is instructive to note that Cho herself denies any such agenda (Lee 2004, 125).

When Russo points to the hags' laughter as an exemplar of powerful comedy, she has, I contend, missed the point. Comedy is not about laughing, but about making someone else laugh. Social laughter, wit and group-based humour are not the same as purposeful, formalised comedy. One of Gaulier's (2000) most memorable injunctions to the clown-in-training was that s/he not "steal the laugh from the audience" by laughing on stage. Feminist claims for comedy's agency in *doing*

something, in creating social change, potentially inhibits female comic performance by weighing it down with a function *which is anything but funny*. As Wilt identifies, (only half-ironically) when one wants to do something about real issues, then "the first thing we must do is reject comedy" (Wilt 1980, 174).

2.5 Contemporary practitioners

Key practitioners explain (via semi-structured interviews – see chapter three) how gender affects the performance of physical comedy in distinct ways.[5] Their practice-based knowledge supports and extends the notion of three broad challenges highlighted above. Director, performer and clown Sue Broadway notes the importance of the grotesque register in her own personal catalogue of physical comedy techniques:

> Stillness. Repetition. Exaggeration. Ridiculous behaviours. The grotesque. Deadpan. Eccentric movement patterns. Breasts and Bum. Teeeeth. Facial exaggeration. Object manipulation work especially surprises and odd results. Inventive Costumes. Isolations – ie movement that separates actions by different parts of the face and body in time. ... Slapstick. Nakedness, physical idiosyncrasy (i.e tall, short, fat, funny legs, pot belly, bald….), social embarrassment and its consequent behaviours. Mock violence. (Broadway 2013, l. 4 – 15)

However, she goes onto elucidate how the specifics of the female body inflect this key register: "[s]ex and nakedness have different meanings for men and women and transgendered performers" (Broadway 2013, l. 17–8), as does the use of comic violence.

> Choices that in men are funny are sometimes grotesque in women. ... Enacted Pain is often unacceptable to an audience when pretended by a woman but funny when performed by a man. (Broadway 2013, l. 17-20)

For these contemporary practitioners the weight of meaning ascribed to the female body has modulated from womb-centric (and hence mother archetype) to beauty-centric. Since conception can be controlled and managed, the current fashionable gender performance is not that of mother, but rather the performance of beauty. Performer Lucy Hopkins discusses this in general terms:

> I think something that may or may not be overlooked is that women are confronted with their self image every day. Just by the nature of the media

[5] Full interview transcripts are included at Appendix 5.

> and the press and the nature of women's bodies. And the woman's body is objectified more because it's nicer, you know it's like, it always has been and I don't even have any clear perspective on that I just know that it is the case. Then as women, we always have our self image present with us, following us around, in a way that men don't nearly as much. They just don't. If they do, ok, if they don't it's fine. If a woman doesn't have her self-image it's a bit weird. (Hopkins 2013, l. 225–31)

Hopkins' use of the word "weird" is significant here. It reveals a heteronormative construction of femininity that involves not only the continual awareness of self-image, but the performance of that awareness. She continues by focussing specifically on comic performance and the training processes in this sector.

> But I think the elephant, the blind spot, is that a lot of male teachers don't appreciate that women struggle with beauty, they're like "look, you're blocked here, you're blocked here, with their students" and they don't know that of course they're blocked, because they're living with that [the struggle with beauty]. (Hopkins 2013, l. 303–6)

This is not to say that notions of beauty and ugliness cannot be utilised for comic effect. Hopkins asserts that these constructs are a form of social performance that the comedian can manipulate.

> When you accept how ugly you are, then you're free, because then you can be beautiful and ugly, but you have to accept the thing you're most afraid of which is that you're ugly. I reckon. When I could go [speaking of herself] you are so ugly, I could go. Then I'm not and then I'm everything. (Hopkins 2013, l. 244–8)

Director and actor Andrea Moore describes this multiplicity in terms of "fabrics" for the performer.

> I have multi-layers to my fabric. And that is intellectual, and it is spiritual and it is physical and it is sexual and there's incredible power in each one of those fabrics. (Moore 2013, l.91–3)

The disguised body can be inhabited by differently gendered bodies, with the proviso from Hopkins that:

> [...] it has to come from the pleasure of doing the physicality. Not just from the physicality, otherwise the characters become really crispy or annoying, or you can't engage with them. (Hopkins 2013, l. 130–2)

However the use of transvestism plays out in different ways according to the gender of the performer. This is because a vital element of the disguised body is its inherent and obvious artificiality – in contemporary Western performance, a man in a dress is

more instantly readable as being disguised than a woman in pants. Peggy Shaw, after a long career of playing with representations of gender, often with a comic purpose, is equivocal about the comedic power of female-to-male drag:

> [...] wearing a suit, I have to work ten times as hard to get laughs. ... whereas Bette [male performer from Bloolips] would come out ... in a frock and it was hysterical. (Shaw 2012, l. 28–30)

Her comic partner in *Split Britches*, Lois Weaver, agrees:

> [...] a man in a dress is funny but a woman in a dress is not. Because, [in the former case you] put down the minority. (Weaver 2012, l. 26–7)

Female bodies deployed in relationship with inanimate objects or as a machine are somewhat compromised by a restrictive gendered performance, which both actor Louise Brehmer and Lucy Hopkins characterise as "blocks" due to the constancy of self-image and the struggle with beauty. This can affect the clarity necessary for performance in these registers, as well as limit the possible options for comedy in the social world. Having identified this block, however, Hopkins takes a pragmatic and essentially optimistic view on the possibility that this challenge can be overcome:

> So it's cool, everybody's living with things, guys are living with different pressures, the point is let's just identify that. Let's liberate that, and then it's go, it's not like women have it so bad – everyone has it so bad, it's just that's a particular struggle, let's liberate it. (Hopkins 2013, l. 306–9)

Beyond the specifics of the body, the social framework that performers operate in affects the practice of physical comedy, as Sue Broadway elucidates:

> Girls grow up in an environment of restraint – where correct behaviour and inhibition are learned from day one. This is the antitheses of physical comedy which is based in chaos and surprise. Learning to act on impulse, to trust misinterpretation, to think sideways, to be outrageous doesn't come easily or naturally to most women. (Or didn't? This may be different for younger women?) (Broadway 2013, l. 48–52)

Lois Weaver identifies the ideological clash from the viewpoint of years of practice and research as a female comic performer:

> See as women, we need to take ourselves seriously. Because nobody else does. So then when you do comedy, you need to not take yourself seriously. And that's the problem ... the oppressed need to be taken seriously, and in order to be successful [in comedy] you have to NOT take yourself seriously. (Weaver 2012, l. 195–199)

Hopkins offers a potential solution to this dilemma by focussing on the comic performance itself:

> The aim is to be a great performer. If you aim to work on yourself, it never ends, you can go and disappear into your own arse, very fast. But if your end point is to be on the stage, this gives a very clear framework ... So, I wouldn't say the aim is so much about freeing yourself from social conditioning, although that does happen to a certain extent, that's like a by-product. (Hopkins 2013, l. 18–29)

When examining the difference between male and female-gendered comic performers, Weaver and Shaw cited their collaboration with the all-male comic troupe Bloolips, noticing a certainty in their colleagues' method that contrasted with their own, more experimental technique:

> LW: They knew, they knew what was funny, they knew and understood and they were willing to ascribe to the formula: Badada badada badada BOOM.
>
> PS: The light has to be bright.
>
> LW: Yeah, the light has to be bright. Badada badada badada BOOM. And we were not interested in the formula. (Weaver and Shaw 2012, l. 11–14)

Broadway also noted that directorial techniques might well have to incorporate notions of gendered difference to produce successful work:

> Where men are often competitive and produce their best and funniest work when challenged, women often need the exact opposite – a secure and supportive environment in which to play. A director who is able to create this energy and at the same time set up situations that encourage the female performer to explore the extremes of possibility will draw the best from the artist. Also a director needs to be able to encourage the male performers in the room to be really nasty or high status – so as to give the female comedian something to play against. (Broadway 2013, l. 62–8)

2.6 Strategies for overcoming the challenges of gender

Despite the challenges outlined above, female physical comedians do undoubtedly exist, albeit in smaller numbers compared to men (Greer 2009; Lavin 2004; Peacock 2009). Extant theory provides only partial illumination as to how these anomalies operate, in other words how, in the terms of my research questions, these performers overcome the challenge of their gender. Firstly, in terms of what I have

termed the ideological clash, there is the possibility of a third way of understanding the function of comedy as Russo (1994) reprovingly tells me:

> The extreme difficulty of producing lasting social change does not diminish the usefulness of ... symbolic models of transgression, and the histories of subaltern and counter-productive cultural activity are never as neatly closed as structural models might suggest. (Russo 1995, 58)

In other words, there is a potential model that sees the comic engaged in a painstakingly slow dialectical struggle with society's image of itself – never effecting change on a grand scale, yet, over time, gradually modulating the systems of power, much as a mutant gene precipitates a centuries-long process of evolution, indeed Bordo (1993, 28) extrapolates from Foucault to characterise gradual shifts of structural power in this way. As Stott explains, comedy "reflects dominant ideological codes, but ... it can also be the vehicle that challenges them" (2005, 102). In this model "humor that does not posit a corrective norm but continuously plays with the terms of norm and perversion" (Williams 1997, 374) can gradually help to redefine those very terms. Feminist humour, then, can be a playful undermining of the phallogocentric binaries of ideal/other, subject/object, normal/deviant be a source of humour, working to "expand the discourse that mires social constructions of gender and open a site of playfulness that has been denied to women for far too long" (Hubbell 2002, x).

Butler's (1990, 270) famous suggestion that gender is "an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" is also useful in understanding the methods employed by some successful female physical comedians, who work to 'un-perform' their gender before the gag, as it were. In the field of stand-up comedy, which, as outlined earlier, is where the majority of scholarship is concentrated, Phyllis Diller is an exemplar of this strategy, wearing a "disguise to diminish her gender ... [a] shapeless garment to cover her body up and to keep the attention on the comedy" (Lavin 2004, 22-3). In Diller's own words:

> And the reason I developed things like [wearing a bag dress] was because I had such a great figure. So I had to dress so that they couldn't see any figure because I wanted to make jokes. (Kohen 2013, 16)

Whilst Diller attempted to neutralise her gender in her stand-up performance, other performers attempt to invoke the power of the "body in disguise" register discussed earlier by performing the male gender. Vesta Tilley, whose vaudeville-era male impersonations were highly celebrated (Wandor 1998, 171) was one such drag king, as is *Split Britches* member, Peggy Shaw. However the comedic efficacy of such strategies is questionable:

> Male transvestism is an occasion for laughter; female transvestism only another occasion for desire [since] … it is understandable that women would want to be men, for everyone wants to be elsewhere than in the feminine position. (Doane 1997, 184)

Some female physical comedians go one step further, re-performing their gender so that they are, in effect women in drag – indeed it could be argued that Diller, with her "platinum fright wig and garish frock" (Kohen 2013, 11) could also be considered in this category. Mae West stands as the most prominent historical exemplar of the female drag queen (Visconti 2014; Balcerzak 2013) whilst in the contemporary comic canon, the all-female world of the television series *Absolutely Fabulous* showcases Jennifer Saunders and Joanna Lumley, whose Eddie and Patsy characters form a double drag act involving larger-than-life gaudy costumes, massive drug and alcohol consumption and an undercurrent of narcissistic nastiness. Written by Saunders, the performances of the pair showcase "grotesque physicality" where "satire ... is literally performed on the bodies of the women" (Stott 2005, 101).

Susan Glenn (2000), Wagner (2011) and Jenkins (1992) identify how female physical comedians have historically used supposed ugliness as a comic strategy:

> Female comics working in the theater in the early twentieth century frequently made the "flaws" in their appearance a central element of their acts, establishing a tradition that would be continued by film comediennes. Especially on the vaudeville and burlesque stages, comediennes saw their lack of physical beauty not as an impediment but as a source of comedy. (Wagner 2011, 37)

In this mode of analysis, the female body is abject, in Kristeva's terms, but deliberately so, utilising what Deborah Covino describes as "performative abjection" (2004, 7). That which the ruling discursive order brands as revolting – the grotesque, unruly female deviant – is celebrated and utilised for comic effect (Russo 1995; Rowe 1995b). Glenn details how female artists of the vaudeville and silent-film era

deliberately “sacrificed” their beauty, pulling “grotesque” faces and “lumbering around” the stage often engaging in “’contortions of the most violent kind’” (in Glenn 2000, 58). Most revealingly one critic described famed “fat woman” comic Marie Dressler as performing her physical feats with “’the courage of a bad boy’” (58). The resonances with transvestism and gender play are clear: for these women to be considered funny, they had, to some extent, to take on characteristics of the male, valorising Martin Grotjahn’s assertion that “[t]he modern comedienne appeals to us without frightening us by impersonating a man in clever disguise” (1957, 99).

Peta Tait (2005, 132-3) notes that in contemporary circus performance, not much has changed, and most of the small number of female comic performers in this genre take on “conventional male clown types” involving “accidental slapstick, hapless stumbling and bumbling without malice.” Peacock (2009, 77-8) describes the work of the two “most famous” contemporary female clowns – Nola Rae and Angela De Castro as “traditional” physical clown strategies such as interactions with inanimate objects and foregrounding bodily functions. However, like their female vaudevillian antecedents, they “regularly perform as masculine characters, or as characters costumed and made-up in such a way as to make gender seem insignificant.” In the Australian context Clare Bartholemew is arguably the leading female exponent of clown and physical comedy for live performance. In her 2003 work *One Man’s Business*, a poignantly funny evocation of a day in the life of a lonely Everyman, she played a bumbling male gendered character in Chaplinesque attire. For these comedians, the foundational comic strategy is a re-presentation of their everyday performance of gender.

Is it possible that this approach, utilising multiple gender performances before or beneath the comic proposal, is potentially detrimental to female comic expression? As highlighted in the introductory chapter, Lucille Ball’s work was celebrated and by any measure, highly successful in a mainstage context – she co-wrote and eventually was executive producer of a body of work that skilfully showcased her own comic body in each of the registers whilst simultaneously maintaining her quotidian performance of woman. However, what does this “performance of woman” actually entail? In an apparent reframing of the pretty/ funny dichotomy, Ballou (2013, 179) argues for the addition of a funny “heteronormatively sexy female body” to the comic

pantheon, contending that such a body can exploit the gap between expectations of un-funniness and the reality of comic situations this body may create (183). Here her best example is of statuesque queerlesque performer Ursula Martinez turning her toned, naked body from the audience to display a tuft of toilet paper wedged between her buttocks (2013, 179). In some sense, Ballou's pretty/ funny body is the contemporary (thus edgier, more overtly sexual) manifestation of the slapstick ingénue as exemplified by the aforementioned Mabel Normand, and including such performers as Elaine May, the young Joan Rivers, Carol Burnett and Mary Tyler-Moore (Kohen 2013). This trope sees the comic body perform femininity in a Western, heteronormatively correct fashion: "tall, thin, beautiful, white, cisgendered and professionally lit" (Ballou 2013, 185) whilst operating in the grotesque register. Do male physical comedians ever consciously perform a comparable "correct" version of masculinity before or around their comic proposal? If so, is this performance as potentially exhausting as "the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress" that Susan Bordo (1993, 166) identifies as key to the heteronormative performance of femininity?

It could also be argued that burlesque - a form enjoying a worldwide renaissance of popularity via a rebranding with postmodern irony – is a contemporary site for staging comic female bodies without layers of gender performances – indeed without layers of anything at all. In *Butthoven* 5th, burlesque performer Michelle L'Amour squeezes her naked buttock cheeks in time to Beethoven's famous symphony. The foremost proponents of this form in Australia are Melbourne's Finucane and Smith, whose work includes Moira Finucane's 'Balloon' routine in 2005's *The Burlesque Hour*, in which the performer smiles beatifically at a lustily baying audience whilst gradually popping a heart-shaped bunch of balloons, thus revealing her lingerie-clad body. However, such comic performances are also predicated on a gender performance as (potentially) exhausting as that utilised by Ballou's pretty/funny body. Further, whilst burlesque may claim to be politically distinct from strip-club culture, my experiential engagement with the form as an audience member leads me to re-appropriate Ballou's aphorism and observe that "an ironic tit is still a tit" (2013, 185).

In terms of comic violence, contemporary female-bodied slapstick has evolved from "flirt[ing] with the notion of inflicting serious pain on the dainty female body without quite allowing it to happen" (Scheinmann 2013, 1). Current practice includes the work of television and film actor Melinda McCarthy who

> [...] gets dirty, she gets horny, and, most important, she gets the shit kicked out of her. Her comedy doesn't inhere in, say, an elegant sense of timing ... but rather in her projection of an oversized resilience against unsettling and thereby hilarious obstacles. (Scheinmann 2013, 2)

The 2011 film *Bridesmaids*, in which McCarthy features, the grotesque register is privileged in multiple scenes depicting explicit, unglamorous sexual encounters, violence and, famously, an extended sequence of vomiting and diarrhoea. The grotesque body is almost brutally present in the stand-up comedy of Sarah Silverman, who presents such jokes as: "I was raped by a doctor … which is so bittersweet for a Jewish girl" (Silverman 2005). The physical comedy of Jane Turner and Gina Riley as exemplified in their television series *Kath and Kim* sees a less hard-edged, but nevertheless highly successful engagement with the grotesque register, overlaid with the disguised register. Like Turner and Riley, British comedian Miranda Hart also bases her comic practice on the use of multiple disguises in her eponymously named television series. In a similar fashion, Bartholemew's mock-Euro-trash musical ensemble *Die Roten Punkte* sees her utilise the disguised register to portray an exaggerated mash-up of various pop and rock music tropes.

Whilst a more detailed analysis of these key physical comedians is not within the scope of this study, their performances are testament to the potential for success of this research project, as it identifies and demonstrates strategies for overcoming the challenges of gender, while developing new strategies for a writer/director to use in practice.

2.6 Conclusion

If comedy is hard for men to perform (when it is not working, the comedian is said to die onstage), the challenges for women in this form can seem insurmountable, as comedian Catie Wilkins acknowledges; "A man will have to be spectacularly bad to actually disappoint, but a woman will have to be spectacularly good just to look

competent" (Moon 2012, 219). This contextual framework provides some explanation as to why; discourse which leads me to a version of what Christina Hughes (2002) refers to as the agency-structure debate. This dialectic stages the tension between the scholarly analysis of *why* oppression, or challenges to women's comic expression occur, and the agency to *change* this: "as much as we can take up particular discursive positions, we can also resist them" (Hughes 2002, 99). This contextual framework defines the structural features of the field which the creative practice aims to change.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological approaches to the study by defining the interpretive paradigm and the particular style of practice-led research that underpins the PhD project. It will also describe the research model, data collection method and analysis techniques.

3.2 The interpretive paradigm: feminism

To help characterize the interpretive paradigm of the research, Hughes' (2002) "concept literacy" is a useful tool. The concept-literate researcher acknowledges both the contested nature of terms and meanings, and the politics and history of that contestation, whilst making his/her own position clear, albeit in a pluralistic way. The researcher understands dominant discourses and attempts to move beyond them, whilst acknowledging the limitations of critical thought in affecting material change.

Following these guidelines, the interpretive framework for this research is defined as a version of sexual difference feminism. This brand of feminist thought diverges from first wave feminism, with its emphasis on political equality and second wave feminism with its emphasis on reproductive control and materialism (Tong 2008). Sexual difference feminism, whose key exponents include Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, utilises a variety of psychoanalytic schools of thought in order to understand gendered subjectivity as different but not fixed, immutable constants. Thus difference characterises the interpretive paradigm and also operates as a "creative analytic tool" as Joan Scott (1988, 43) fashions it. This understanding of difference allows the researcher to utilise two key feminist thinkers in the conceptual framework of this study – Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler - without conflating their differing views on subjectivity and gender, and whilst acknowledging the divergence of their discursive heritage.

Julia Kristeva's (1982) theory of abjection via her analysis of Mary Douglas' work on symbolic systems is key to understanding the challenges associated with deploying a

female body in the comic mode. As adumbrated in the introductory chapter, Judith Butler's (1990) conception of gender as performance is utilised to formulate strategies for successful female comic performance.

Whilst Butler and Kristeva ground their understanding of gender identity differently, Butler herself acknowledges that feminism is "a movement that can contain, without domesticating, conflicting interpretations on fundamental issues" (Butler 2004, 176). This movement must support "something besides theory ... such as interventions at social and political levels that involve action, sustained labor and institutionalized practice" (Butler 2004, 204).

Thus is the study situated in the wider feminist research project, where the imperative is to

> [...] read against the grain of dominant discourses and the privileged positions that are constructed within them. … to look beyond the content of the text and to see, and critique, how this content works upon us to shape meaning and desire. (Hughes 2002, 188)

Following a poststructuralist research blueprint it is assumed that there is no value-free knowledge, and that the researcher's desires shape that which is being researched. As Patti Lather (1991, 15) proposes, the project will engage with "a more hesitant and partial scholarship capable of helping us to tell a better story in a world marked by the elusiveness with which it greets our effort to know it". The study utilises what Maithree Wickramasinghe describes as

> [...] alternative epistemologies relating to the filling of knowledge gaps and the 'feminising' processes of knowledge production. Filling knowledge gaps includes identifying, naming, constructing and giving value to issues with particular significance for women's bodies. (Wickramasinghe 2010, 41)

Here, Wickramasinghe is referring to a valorisation of non-positivist knowledge systems that comprise the "tacit dimension" as Michael Polanyi (1967) termed it. Theatrical performance is one of these systems; a way of knowing through the body (Pelias 2008, 186) and as such forms the basis for the research project.

3.3 Practice-led research

In the spirit of Butler's words, then, I have engaged in practice, in cycles of doing/thinking, rather than observing/thinking: "[p]erformative inquiry cannot be

accomplished from an observational stance; it demands participation" (Pelias 2008, 187). If there are challenges for female physical comedians, it follows that the research project must necessarily aim to identify these and discover ways to best negotiate them in practice. In this study, the practical/exegetical weighting for the research output is 60/40. The central trajectory of practice has occurred over a number of cycles that inform the development of a major theatrical work, *The Furze Family Variety Hour* which features a female/male comic duo and the researcher positioned as writer/director.

Carol Gray has endorsed the re-purposing of the terms and techniques of practice into the language and methods of research (Haseman 2009; Haseman and Mafe 2009). My own practice as a writer/director in creative development is informed by specific techniques which serve as methods of research for this study. These are:

- Improvisation within limitations. These limitations are garnered from the research problem and sub-questions, and from emergent understandings generated by the contextual review.
- Rich documentation of the process – capturing images, sounds and written words.
- Collaborative evaluation of this rich documentation – initiating cycles of reflection, analysis and further improvisation with the entire creative team.
- Regular showings to key practitioners, stakeholders and core samples of target audience.

This democratic, dialogic, collaborative writing/rehearsal process can be situated within a tradition of practice that creates comedy for a wide audience, as exemplified by Dale's analysis of early slapstick cinema, where production involved

> [...] a nonstop pitch of ideas about everything from the basic setting or premise, through the details of action and accident, to the final shape of the picture. This process continued while the cameras turned... [following this there were] pre-release sneak previews after which the team would compare notes and then recut and often enough reshoot. (Dale 2000, 2)

This doctoral practice combines the research agenda as established earlier with what I term the aesthetic imperative – that is, to create a work that showcases old vaudeville comic routines within a new vaudeville structure. Since my 2007 work *Waiting for Merlot* which I co-devised and performed with my long-time collaborator, Liz Skitch, I have been exploring the new vaudeville aesthetic, utilising an episodic structure featuring short, highly physical routines, either duo or solo. As a writer/director, I am interested in how simplicity and virtuosity combine in physical comedy to take the place of, or obviate the need for, a well-made plot structure or psychologically real characters.

The creative process began with an exploration of vaudeville and new vaudeville forms. The vaudeville term became popular in post-industrial revolution England to describe variety, revue, cabaret and music hall, where the echoes of medieval minstrelsy and descendents of Commedia dell'Arte's Arlechinno/ Harlequins could be found (McKechnie 1931). Performers such as Joey Grimaldi (arguably the most famous clown in the Western tradition) shaped small, repeatable and

> [...] highly individual turns, or acts, to be successful. Both music-hall and variety offered a series of unrelated acts grouped together on a bill for an evening's entertainment. Variety spread from London to all corners of the English-speaking world. (Cullen, Hackman and McNeilly 2007, xii)

The form found its apogee in North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where an increasingly diverse population created a demand for entertainment which "variety "– rebadged and thus given a certain class as "vaudeville" by canny promoters – was able to meet (Cullen, Hackman and McNeilly 2007; Napier 1986). Old-time variety performers were challenged by emigrant performers from Europe, who often "... came from a circus background rather than the theatre. Accustomed to playing to the audience, they charmed customers with a performance style that disregarded the fourth wall so central to the growing movement toward naturalistic drama in the nineteenth century" (Cullen, Hackman and McNeilly 2007, xv).

The vaudeville stage was extraordinarily diverse, featuring:

> Illusionists, tumblers, jugglers, clog dancers, wire-walkers, magicians, balancers, rope-spinners, skaters, ventriloquists, tap dancers, sharp-shooters,

> musical acts, aerialists, bicycle acts, card manipulators, trampoline acts, adagio dancers, animal acts, knife-throwers, escapologists, mental-telepathy acts, bands and even ballet dancers... (Napier 1986, 2)

Other iconic performers who spent many years working in this genre were Sarah Bernhardt, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Well into the era of talking pictures, vaudeville remained the most popular Western form of entertainment.

New vaudeville, which as a term, emerged in the U.S. in the mid 1980s (Carlson 2004, 123) has a tougher, meaner streak than its parent form – divesting itself of sentimentality and corn and, like its near relative, "new circus", espouses a "modern ironic and reflexive consciousness of the performing act and closely and consciously related to the traditions of circus and clowning" (Carlson 2004, 122). From performances such as Bill Irwin's seminal 1982 work *The Regard of Flight* through to more recent manifestations such as SoHo's 'Sideshow Saturday Night' (Carlson 2004, 124) the form can be defined by a postmodern pastiche of traditional vaudeville and clown structured as episodes on a theme, rather than disparate acts. These may be more or less delineated through devices such as music, scenographic modulation or merely a simple change of costume indicator. In their 2001 work, *Bewilderness*, British duo The Right Size wove together a tapestry of short comic routines, characters, musical numbers and stage 'magic' with a narrative premise – two old friends had reunited and fallen down the back of a couch.

> The variety to be found in an evening's entertainment by a new vaudevillian or a new circus act depends on the individual performer's versatility rather than an integrated bill of diverse performers. Perhaps the one person or one-group show provides the only economical alternative for producers of variety. Instead of an 18- or 22-minute traditional vaudeville act combining character delineation, monologue, dance, music and comedy, modern writers-performers of multiple skills can devise and perform an 80-minute or full two-act theatre piece. Lily Tomlin, Avner the Eccentric, the Flying Karamazov Brothers, Bette Midler, Bill Irwin, Paul Zaloom, Bloolips, John Leguizamo, Levent the Magician, Mickey O'Connor and many other talented and lesser-known performers have not only met the standards for traditional vaudevillians, but have also set the mark for new vaudevillians. (Cullen, Hackman and McNeilly 2007, 825)

New vaudeville utilises an economy of scenography and presents comic tropes and formulae in their most distilled form. As in traditional vaudeville, the fourth wall between performer and audience is almost permanently dispensed with, however

this is not an absolute rule. Perhaps the most significant distinction that can be made between traditional and new vaudeville is that the contemporary form has the potential to stage ideas and themes. Unlike traditional vaudeville, where "little effort was made to coordinate the individual acts into an ideologically or aesthetically consistent program" (Jenkins 1992, 64), new vaudeville can tell a story. In this regard, it provides an ideal vehicle for this study to examine its key issues and stage its findings.

3.4 Research model

The structure for my research resembles and indeed appropriates features of the action research cycle. This research model, popular in education and the social sciences, is constructed as follows: the researcher responds to a perceived problem or area in need of change in practice, hypothesises how a modified approach to practice can ameliorate the problem, tests the hypothesis, reflects on its effectiveness, re-hypothesises and begins the cycle again (Somekh 2006, 6-7).

> As a change methodology and a research process, data collection and analysis is a continuous process in AR [action research]. In this respect, AR has two agendas: a 'practical' agenda aimed at the achievement of a specific organisational goal and an understanding of the nature of the emergent strategic process engaged therein; and a more formal 'research' agenda through which new knowledge ... is uncovered. (Martincic 2011, 7)

It is as a "change methodology" that the action research model is most useful for this study, since I am aiming for the "specific organisational goal" of developing replicable techniques in writing and directing physical comedy. However, such a tightly structured model, involving discrete periods of action/reflection/theorising does not accurately describe how praxis operates in this project. Instead, this study draws on notions of methodological messiness to create

> [...] a place where the concepts travel back and forth in the space between practice and theory in a messy way; perhaps it too allows for the messiness of methodology, methods, and mangling in post-qualitative work. (Sommerfeldt 2014, 7)

The model of inquiry can best be considered as a research conversation, where various modes of research – cycles of creative practice, reflection on practice, contextual reviews, audits of historical and contemporary artistic practice and

interviews with key practitioners in the field – come into conversation to shed light on each other. In contrast to an orderly progression of research modes (observe-theorise-test-reflect), this conversation model reflects the dynamics of a productive and inclusive conversation. Each mode asks questions – converses – with the other. This allows for the in-the-moment exchange of meaning-making, for idiosyncratic and open – sometimes messy and overlapping – ways of moving between epistemologies: "[a] good conversation is never fully under control" (Leadbeater 2006, 48). The term deliberately references Socratic dialogue (a method which has been legitimised in social science research, as in Wortel and Verweij (Wortel 2008)), whilst implying a relative informality of tone and a symbiotic relationship between participants.

The conversation model also allows me to foreground the inter-epistemological power relationships as is appropriate in a post-structuralist paradigm. In this way I can attempt to negotiate a useful balance between data-driven and theory-driven research design as identified by Dick and Roberts (2003):

> The latter accepts the existing body of knowledge as the foundation for the current research. The assumptions about what is being researched are expected to be consistent with that knowledge. In emergent research, researchers try to put aside their presumptions to engage with the research situation as it is. (2)

To put aside one's presumptions, then, entails an openness to emergence that encompasses not only the data generated from the research tasks, but the character and construction of the research tasks themselves. As in a genuine, open dialogue, where the participants allow themselves to be affected by each other's arguments and rhetorical whorls, so too do the members of the research conversation shift and change as new patterns, meanings and perspectives emerge. In productive conversations, says Leadbeater, "[y]ou have to be prepared to adjust, not simply to defend the views you came into the conversation with" (Leadbeater 2006, 49). The following table gives more specific details of the creative practice cycles, what they entail and how they are guided by the research sub-questions identified earlier.

Table #1: Creative practice cycles

Creative practice cycle	**Details of practice**	**Questions for practice**	**Outcomes of practice**
The Bits and Bumps Experiment	4 day creative development process. 2 actors/devisors – 1 female, 1 male. Researcher as devisor/director. Small routines generated through exercises set by the researcher.	What are the strategies that physical comedians use? How does gender affect the performance of these strategies?	Informal showing to colleagues and friends in the Studio, QUT Kelvin Grove in September 2012. No audience feedback sought. Broad aesthetic guidelines for final work made.
The Vaudeville Hour	2 week creative development process. 2 actors/devisors – 1 female, 1 male. 1 sound designer. Researcher as writer/devisor/director. Move from first to second draft through exercises set by the researcher. Develop draft sound and set design.	What are the strategies that physical comedians use? How does gender affect the performance of these strategies? What strategies do female physical comedians use to overcome the challenges of gender?	Short work-in-progress season at La Mama, Melbourne in June 2013. Feedback from colleagues and key stakeholders gathered via semi-structured interviews. Second draft of show completed. Draft soundtrack and set design completed.
The Furze Family Variety Hour version 1	2 week creative development process. 2 actors/devisors – 1 female, 1 male. 1 sound designer. 1 set designer. Researcher as writer/devisor/director. Move from second draft to third draft	What strategies do female physical comedians use to overcome the challenges of gender? How can a writer/director facilitate the use of these strategies in a mainstage context?	Work-in-progress showing at QUT Kelvin Grove for public audience.
The Furze Family Variety Hour	2 week creative development process, leading to 2 week rehearsal for examinable production. 2 actors/devisors – 1 female, 1 male. 1 sound designer. 1 set designer. 1 lighting designer. Researcher as writer/devisor/director. Move from second draft to performance draft	How can a writer/director facilitate successful female performance of physical comedy in a mainstage context?	Public performance season of examinable work at the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts as part of the 2014 Brisbane Festival. 2–7 September.

3.5 Position of the researcher

Gray's (1996) seminal paper on practice-led research clearly identifies the multiplicity of roles that the practice-led researcher may assume within a single project:

> [...] sometimes generator of the research material – art/design works, and participant in the creative process; sometimes self-observer through reflection on action and in action, and through discussion with others; sometimes observer of others for placing the research in context, and gaining other perspectives; sometimes co-researcher, facilitator and research manager, especially of a collaborative project. (Gray 1998, 13)

This is an apt description of my own research. In the past, I have most often engaged with comedy as a devisor/performer. In this study, I have taken on the role of devisor/director, since this not only has allowed me to control more fully the various elements that comprise the finished work, but also has required observation and reflection; artistic techniques which have been transposed into data collection methods (see below).

Reflexivity is a foundational principle of the qualitative research project, "in the sense of continuous critical reflection on the research processes ... used to produce knowledge" (Holland and Ramazanoglu 1995, 281). Within the diverse modes of research that comprise this project, I am situated in various relationships to that which is being researched. In the textual analysis involved in generating contextual reviews my relationship to the text is framed by a poststructuralist distrust of discourse as described earlier. In audits of historical and contemporary practice, this "distrust" is complicated by the added frame of my own aesthetic prejudices and desires. In interviews with key practitioners, the research imperative is modulated by the politics of personal and professional relationships. Across all modes, the lens of my own artistic history and aspirations filters the researcher/researched interaction, but perhaps most significantly in the area of creative practice, where "that which is researched" is my own practice. As a female-gendered practitioner, I must acknowledge that I have certain desires for this practice, for the female-gendered comedians in the work to be "successful" and for the finished work to meet professional standards and strategic outcomes, particularly as it was programmed in

a public space (Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts) in a public arts festival (the Brisbane Festival).

3.6 Data collection methods

The use of multiple sub-questions reflects the multiplicity of research methods used throughout the project, foremost of which is a process of reflection on practice. This has taken the form of journaling throughout the devising and rehearsal period combined with reflective analysis of mediatised documentation of this work (video, still images). This dual process draws upon Schön's (1991) understanding of the movement from reflection-in practice to reflection-on practice. Data has also been collected via semi-structured interviews with key creative members of the devising process and with industry professionals in this field. This instrument of research involves open-ended questions rather than set questionnaires, allowing the participants to define terms and construct their own meanings, rather than receiving them as predetermined ideas from the interviewer (Yin 2011). The use of these various techniques within a practice-led study has precipitated what Flick (in Denzin and Lincoln 2008, 7) describes as a process of "crystallisation" whereby the researcher employs a "combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study ... a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness and depth to any inquiry."

3.7 Data analysis

In line with the explicitly feminist nature of the research project, this process "combines inductivism with deductivism in data analysis as a means of engaging with the political and theoretical assumptions as well as the field data of feminist empirical research" (Wickramasinghe 2010, 45). Such a combination acknowledges what Hughes (2002, 6) calls the "false separation" often drawn between empirical fieldwork and theory. This is exemplified by my first cycle of creative practice, where I generated devising exercises based upon theoretical constructs, whilst patterns and recurring themes that emerged from the practice both verified and modulated the theory, and generated new constructs.

Fenton (2012) describes how the reflective process that guided his own practice-led study was based upon appropriated methodologies from the writings of Argyris and Schön. In turn, I have appropriated Fenton's terms of analysis as he moved his ideas along the data/findings continuum. Fenton makes "assumptions of practice" within the creative process which, after reflection-on action, become "qualifications of practice" (Fenton 2012, 36). In my research process these "assumptions" are initially generated by an engagement with theory and become "qualifications" through practice. These qualified learnings then become the assumptions of practice that are tested in the next cycle, and the process is repeated.

The qualifications of practice that emerged from the final preparatory creative cycle – *The Furze Family Variety Hour version 1* – helped structure a process of writing and directing physical comedy that operated on a continuum of awareness moving from the general to the specific, encompassing modes of practice that I termed understanding, de-mystifying and enabling. This process, and these modes, were then utilised to create the examinable work, *The Furze Family Variety Hour*, and these three terms structured the analysis of the data gathered from this piece of practice.

3.8 Ethical Clearance

The study has been granted ethical clearance by the University Human Research Ethics Committee (UHREC), approval number 1200000493. Clearance was sought and granted for me to record and cite the creative development cycles, to cite my video and written journals and those of the actor/devisors involved in the research tasks. Permission was also granted to record and cite interviews with key practitioners in the field of comic performance. Since the specific knowledge and experience of creative practitioners whether as co-creatives in my practice, or as interviewees, was of value to this research, clearance was sought and granted for these individuals not to remain anonymous, but instead, to have the right to edit or withdraw comments on being presented with interview transcripts.

3.9 Collaborative statement

Whilst as the writer/director of the project, intellectual property rights for the final performance and accompanying exegesis will be held by me, the work is a collaborative artistic project, as the actors are enrolled in the work as co-devisors. Following the standard practice for work in development, the actors have been acknowledged as co-devisors in all iterations of the work.

3.10 Conclusion

A public performance presents the findings of this study, as its "claims to knowledge must necessarily be reported through the symbolic language and forms *specific* to performance" (Haseman 2009, 57). Supporting this piece of performance is a written exegesis: "the gesture which enables the candidate to make a discursive claim for the significance of his or her study" (Haseman and Mafe 2009, 226), and a digital version of the work, framed with still images, the performance text and marketing collateral from the season. This final exegetical element attempts to address the problems associated with ongoing peer review inherent in practice-led research projects, where a significant portion of the research output is live performance (Haseman 2009, 58). The process of creating these permanent records of research is a complex one, as researcher/practitioner Caroline Rye has noted:

> Performance frames time and space as singular and unrecoverable and this is in direct contradiction to a record in which time and space are constructed as fixed and reproductive. … However if our practice is to function effectively as research beyond the experience of the immediate performance we have to find types of document that can speak about this inherent paradox: that is, documents that do not suggest an unproblematic transparency between the live event and its record and therefore that the two cannot be conflated. (Rye 2002, 16)

Rich media files, which incorporate a broad range of documentary strategies in order to effectively capture and communicate the ephemeral performance experience, help to support the written exegesis in locating the practice within a broader research conversation. These three elements; performance, exegesis and rich media file will combine to produce a "reflexive, multivoiced text" (Denzin and Lincoln 2008, 33) that tells the story of my research whilst making a contribution to knowledge for the use of practitioners and scholars in this field.

4.0 Preparatory Creative Cycles:

Bits and Bumps Experiment, The Vaudeville Hour, The Furze Family Variety Hour version 1.

This chapter outlines the emergent findings garnered through three experimental cycles of creative practice that formed the initial research for this doctoral study.

Each cycle took the form of a creative development period in which I was enrolled as devisor/director, working with a male/female comic duo. Initially I set and directed performance exercises and ran extended improvisations, guided by my research that identified five registers of the comic body – the grotesque, the disguised, in relationship to inanimate object, the body as machine and the body in the social world. As is typical of my practice in clown and physical comedy, after each exercise/ improvisation (which was videorecorded), the creative team discussed and identified the moments where the comedy was most successful. These points were noted and initial ideas about how each moment might be structured to create a routine were mooted. Throughout, the focus was the aesthetic imperative of combining simplicity and virtuosity in episodic routines within a new vaudeville framework. The creative team explored classic vaudeville tropes and experimented with approaches to reframe and contemporise them.

In formulating the exercises that shaped the devising process, I was led by the dictum that “originality in terms of the gags themselves is almost never the correct answer in slapstick” (Dale 2000, 21). As Agee (1958) identified in his seminal essay on slapstick film, physical comedy is based upon a relatively small series of standardised units of gesture, however audiences respond to the idiosyncratic manipulation of these gags by specific performers. In this way, the form is similar to musical performance, where the unique touch or timbre of an individual musician is juxtaposed with the rigid discipline involved in recreating precise musical lines. Like Dale, Agee quotes slapstick director Mack Sennett in warning against an emphasis on originality: “Anyone who tells you he has discovered something new is a fool or a liar or both” (Agee 1958, 7).

The conceptual framework presented a reading of physical comedy theory through a sexual difference feminist lens. This reading identified how gender problematised the performance of physical comedy by way of three broad challenges, which I categorised as the *neutral fallacy*, the *heavy body* and the *ideological clash*. My creative process across the three cycles/ research sites was in essence an ongoing experiment with a variety of techniques that a writer/director could apply to combat these challenges in practice.

Each cycle of creative practice generated a piece of performance and a written script. The summarised findings presented here are the outcome of analysed data comprising the performance outcomes, the scripts, my reflective journal, video documentation, reflective interviews with collaborators and an interview with a key artist responding to a showing of the work in progress. It should be noted that when my journal is cited, italicised text indicates a response to the video recording of the rehearsal/ devising process, that is, reflection-on, as differentiated from reflection-in practice in Schön's (1991) terms.

4.1 Creative practice/ research sites

4.1.1 The Bits and Bumps Experiment

The initial cycle of practice, *The Bits and Bumps Experiment*, was a four-day creative development process that aimed to address the first two sub-questions of the study:

> *What are the strategies that physical comedians use?*
>
> *How does gender affect the performance of these strategies?*

The result was an informal showing to an invited audience that presented nine short routines, some solo, mostly duo, which explored the five different registers of physical comedy. Scenes included a fight over where to place the sets and props, a dancer attempting to perform a ribbon tossing routine (getting tangled in the ribbon, stabbing herself in the eye with it), an overly literal sign language interpreter, an incompetent office worker on their first day on the job, and a dinner party that ended with a cream pie in the face. Emerging from this cycle of practice was a focus upon the idea of the male/female comic duo – the implications of this on the

emerging structure of the piece and the possibilities for developing new performance tropes. The concept of shared punch-lines - when comic bodies are accorded an equal share of the comic focus - was also an emergent idea from this creative development period.

4.1.2 The Vaudeville Hour

The second cycle of creative practice was a two-week rehearsal process culminating in a two-night season in Melbourne's La Mama Theatre's Creative Development series for a paying audience of the general public. Continuing the exploration of contemporary versions of classic vaudeville routines, this show included a dance routine, musical performance, a Shirley Temple impersonation (ending in vomit), and extended slapstick routines. A draft script of this work emerged, which took the form of a series of short routines, linked by the device of a flip-book with scene titles, operated by the performers. This cycle took the emergent findings from *The Bits and Bumps Experiment* and tested them in practice, and in addition addressed the question:

> *What strategies do female physical comedians use to overcome the challenges of gender?*

4.1.3 The Furze Family Variety Hour version 1

The Furze Family Variety Hour was a two-week rehearsal process followed by a one-night showing at the Queensland University of Technology's Studio space for a general public audience. This second development was partially funded by Arts Queensland and thus involved a larger creative team, including draft set and sound design elements. The work was based strongly on the draft script emerging from the previous cycle, featuring in addition a dinner scene (in drag), a love scene (ending in vomit), and an extended slapstick chase scene in the style of Bugs Bunny, performed in nude suits. The show also featured some traditional vaudeville ideas reframed for a contemporary audience; a ventriloquist/ puppet act performed with a blow-up sex doll and a sword-swallowing routine performed with a balloon. The practice also addressed the final research sub-question:

How can a writer/director facilitate the use of these strategies in a mainstage context?

4.2 Consolidated emergent findings from creative investigations

As the methodology chapter outlined, the analytical approach to the data was a cyclic process of establishing *assumptions* via theory, which were then tested, and modulated into *qualifications* of practice, following Fenton's (2012) method of analysis. The qualifications of practice from one cycle became assumptions of practice for the next. The final creative development period generated qualifications of practice which form the basis of the emergent findings presented below.

FINDING: *Codifying work via the registers concept is valid and useful*

Each cycle of practice involved multiple comedy routines featuring a variety of styles and genres. Some scenes were primarily physical, others featured text either spoken or sung. The practice demonstrated the validity of the concept of the registers in understanding how the body operates in physical comedy. The creative team found that each register has specific practical applications for the writer/director and for the performer of physical comedy. Most significantly, understanding these registers helped to precisely identify the location of the humour and thus to clarify and heighten the comedy.

FINDING: *Complexities of the body affect the female comic project*

These experiments with a male/ female comic duo showed that the female physical comedian is working a triple shift as it were, working to overcome the male image of comedy that is superscribed over the genre, then working to overcome the weight of meaning that both they and the audience ascribe to their body and THEN trying to make with the funny stuff. The pressure to conform to a certain bodily image of femaleness can stymie creativity when devising routines, as performers choose not to draw attention to those parts of their body that do not fit with whatever gender performance is currently fashionable. Audience interactions can also be compromised by this inner emotional disturbance, as the performer can assume that her audience is penalising her for her inept gender performance.

In a reflective interview Louise Brehmer, performer in *The Bits and Bumps Experiment,* shared a very personal experience that demonstrates the challenge of the heavy female gendered body when attempting to make physical comedy:

> It's purely my own insecurities about my own body shape. I don't mind appearing ugly, you know, wearing weird make up or wearing a bizarre costume, but my insecurity comes from what I see when I look in a mirror and anything that's going to highlight something that I just naturally feel insecure about as a woman. I just close up. I don't know why, I wish there was a part of myself that could just say "who cares if you've got a big bum, who cares if you've got a tummy?" or whatever. And I hate it that... when you pulled this out [holds up a green lycra unitard], I just went [strangled sound of pure pain], even though the comedic side of my brain went, that's gold, that's just pure gold. Hilarious. Me wearing a unitard, that's just funny in itself. That's a block that I have. And I suspect that women probably face that more than male physical comedians. Not to say that that guys aren't worried about their appearance. I think that for me there's just a whole lot of issues that go with that. (Brehmer 2012, l. 47–57)

Brehmer's reflection demonstrates the difficulty of situating one's body in the registers of physical comedy whilst fearing that body will be deemed unworthy long before the punch-line.

FINDING: *Develop shared punch-lines by managing control of the comic location*

Control of the comic location is vital to ensure the punch-lines are shared between male and female gendered bodies onstage. This goal provided the impetus for devising particular scenes in *The Vaudeville Hour*, such as The Musicians, which featured Liz playing her accordion and Leon playing a ramshackle percussion kit. Liz began the piece, waiting at the end of each musical phrase for Leon to play one of his instruments. Obstacles kept preventing him from joining in – his seat was wrong, he had the wrong page on his music, the cymbal stand was too high, he did an air swing etc. The first iteration of this routine seemed to achieve the stated goal:

> I gave Liz the direction – you are very important, you are doing a very beautiful musical piece. She really invested in it, and so we really believed her growing distress when Leon didn't come in. Then we also really bought her near-heart attack when he finally did crash his drum sticks on the cymbal and bang the bass drum. It was a lovely shifting of focus between the two comedians. In some ways, this meant a lovely blending of what could be two solo routines into one super routine. (Boyle 2013)

(Left to right: Leon Cain and Liz Skitch tuning the vuvuzela. The Vaudeville Hour, La Mama Theatre. Note the similar blank, slightly idiotic focus on the performers' faces. Photo: Ange Leggas 2013.)

On reflection I felt that this shared control could have been more successfully managed on my part as the devisor/ director in the process. If the punch-lines are to be shared, then the performers must be operating at the same level, with the same scale or size of their performances. My journal evidences how I failed to monitor that shared level of performance size in successive iterations of the scene, and hence lost the shared location of the joke:

> *On reflection, I feel that we lost that focus on "give and take" when we revisited the scene. As I review video footage of the rehearsals, I see that Leon's performance grew larger and larger whilst Liz's remained delicate and light. This was where I could definitely have modulated my directorial advice based upon the developing scene. As previously mentioned, "keep it light" is a constant directorial exhortation from me – however I feel that in this particular routine, one actor (Liz) took it on board, and one didn't (Leon).* (Boyle 2013)

Notwithstanding my dissatisfaction in regards to the specific goal of creating moments of shared control over the location of the comedy, feedback from the performance outcome tended to affirm that, for our audience, we had been successful in this regard:

> The performers took it in turns more or less to be the comic focus ... Both have moments of the extremely silly and moments of reflecting the audience viewpoint of the others silliness back at us. (Broadway 2013, l. 40–3)

It is instructive to note how Broadway highlights what I came to term the straight/ high status role of "reflecting the audience viewpoint" as a vital component of the work.

Maintaining control over the comic location became a key goal for *The Furze Family Variety Hour*, when a deeper understanding of this concept allowed the creative team to utilise the variations of comic duos to ensure the punch-lines were equally shared. The photo series below illustrates the dance of the comic location in the Finishing each others' sentences scene, a piece of verbal slapstick[6] structured around a straight/funny relationship. Here Helen takes the funny role, as she enrages straight man Leon, who is trying to tell her a story. Note how the eyeline of each performer tracks the movement of the comic location between the two bodies as the scene unfolds.

(Left to right: Leon Cain and Helen Cassidy. The Furze Family Variety Hour version 1, QUT Studio. Photo: Lukas Davidson 2014.)

[6] A performance style utilising the rhythms of slapstick in verbal form, comprising of "sarcastic aside ... verbosity ... orotundity... one liners, puns, vivid slang, outrageous metaphors, double entendres, nonsequiturs [verbal burlesque], malapropisms, mispronunciations, getting names wrong... foreign accents" (Dale 2000, 6).

FINDING: ***Utilise the grotesque register to overcome the challenges of gender***

The grotesque register in the form of actual physical costume pieces of genitalia (as featured in the photograph below) became symbols (both phallic and yonic) of a significant piece of what I came to term de-mystification in this process. The prosthetic penis, with its dangle and tangle of pubic hair, and the lusciously bushy female pubic triangle were able to be manipulated (no *double entendre* intended) for maximum comic effect, but the power of this scene was not merely the comic transgression of social norms regarding naked bodies.

The artificial nature of the "bits", with their Velcro backing that allowed them to be ripped off and swapped at will served as dangly, hairy evidence of how gender could be performed (Butler (1990) was laughing along!). In both *The Vaudeville Hour* and *Furze Family Variety Hour version 1,* gender was not only socially constructed; it was absurd, ridiculous, and literally laughable.

(Left to right: Liz Skitch and Leon Cain, having removed their costumes to reveal nude suits. The Vaudeville Hour, La Mama. Photo: Ange Leggas 2013.)

The grotesque register also became the frame for another learning that emerged from this cycle of practice, namely that it is possible for comic violence to involve the female body, if the action is framed strategically. Allowing the female body to enact violence and have violence done to her de-mystifies her body, lightening the heaviness of anti-comic womb-inscription as elucidated in the contextual framework.

Situating the male and female bodies as siblings framed their violence as an acceptable family squabble, whilst the politically incorrect image of male-to-female violence was acknowledged as "not funny", even whilst the audience laughed despite themselves.

FINDING: ***Practise affirmative action in the rehearsal room***

The director can employ a form of affirmative action in the rehearsal room, as I did throughout the process of *The Vaudeville Hour*. This extract from my journal highlights an example: "Responding to my own reflection from last week's work, I try a piece of subtle affirmative action and ask Liz to take on the role of hypnotist, as it's going to be the instigating role in this scene" (Boyle 2013). If the female comic body is to claim the space and the punch-lines on an equal footing as the male body, such choices are essential – yet they must be negotiated carefully, since a heavy hand has the potential to stifle comedy.

When directing a female/ male duo, establishing a middle ground between challenging the performers and supporting them is essential when devising and rehearsing material that showcases the comic potential of both genders. This follows Sue Broadway's insights as noted in the contextual framework, calling for a competitive yet supportive rehearsal environment for male and female comic performers. (Broadway 2013, 62–6)

Thus in the rehearsal room for *The Furze Family Variety Hour version 1*, I combined supportive language and gestures with moments of high pressure, such as running simple clown improvisations where the onus is on the performers to be immediately funny. I ran an open rehearsal room, and regular showings with invited feedback kept a controlled amount of pressure on the creative team.

FINDING: *Enable the female comic body*

The process of enabling the specifics of each female comic body – their particular skills and idiosyncrasies - means identifying moments where a body can be located in a particular register for comic effect:

> Leon made an offer of jumping onto the platform (I had given a design brief for Josh to create another level, with stairs, to give an almost Meyerholdian playspace for the actors). Helen couldn't reach the platform. "Sorry, I can't do that – I'm a little short", she said. Great, let's use it, said I, and it became an excellent game for her clown. We milked this for all it was worth. (Boyle 2014)

Here my journal describes how I identified a moment where Helen could locate her body in relationship with inanimate objects, then directed her to extend that, to build on it, resonating with Broadway's recommendation in her feedback:

> When working as a director I try to get performers to exploit the specifics of their own bodies, qualities and skills. In other words to avoid generalisation and discover what is specifically funny about THEM and THIS SITUATION. Things are only funny if they are true – however unlikely. (Broadway 2013, 7–11)

In the *Furze Family Variety Hour version 1* process, the moment described above led to an extended lazzi where Helen showcased her physical ineptitude in trying to mount the platform. Her difficult relationship with the inanimate object, involving little flutters of her legs, painful wrenches of her knee and her exposed knickers, allowed her to claim the comic focus of the scene, even whilst Leon was talking. This moment typified the practice and the director/ performer relationship throughout the process.

4.3 Conclusion

Framing my creative practice cycles as sites of research enabled me to gather data that addressed the research sub-questions. Of these three cycles, the most significant learnings were garnered during the second developmental creative cycle, *The Vaudeville Hour*. These were then tested and refined in the third, *The Furze Family Variety Hour version 1*. The result of this multi-cycle approach was a new process for writing and directing physical comedy that answered the driving research question, and was thus used to create the examinable work: *The Furze Family*

Variety Hour. Analysis of this product and its process is the subject of the next chapter.

5.0 Major creative practice cycle:
The Furze Family Variety Hour,
September 2 – 7, 2014.
Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts Shopfront

The examinable cycle of creative practice in this study was a public presentation of *The Furze Family Variety Hour*, staged as part of the Brisbane Festival at the Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts. My role in this creative work was writer/ director. The show was performed and devised with Helen Cassidy and Leon Cain, with sound design and composition by David Megarrity (with Samuel Vincent and Kellee Green), set design by Josh McIntosh and lighting by Timothy Cummings. The script of this work is included at Appendix 1, with production stills at Appendix 2 and marketing collateral at Appendix 3. The video of the complete work can be found at Appendix 4.

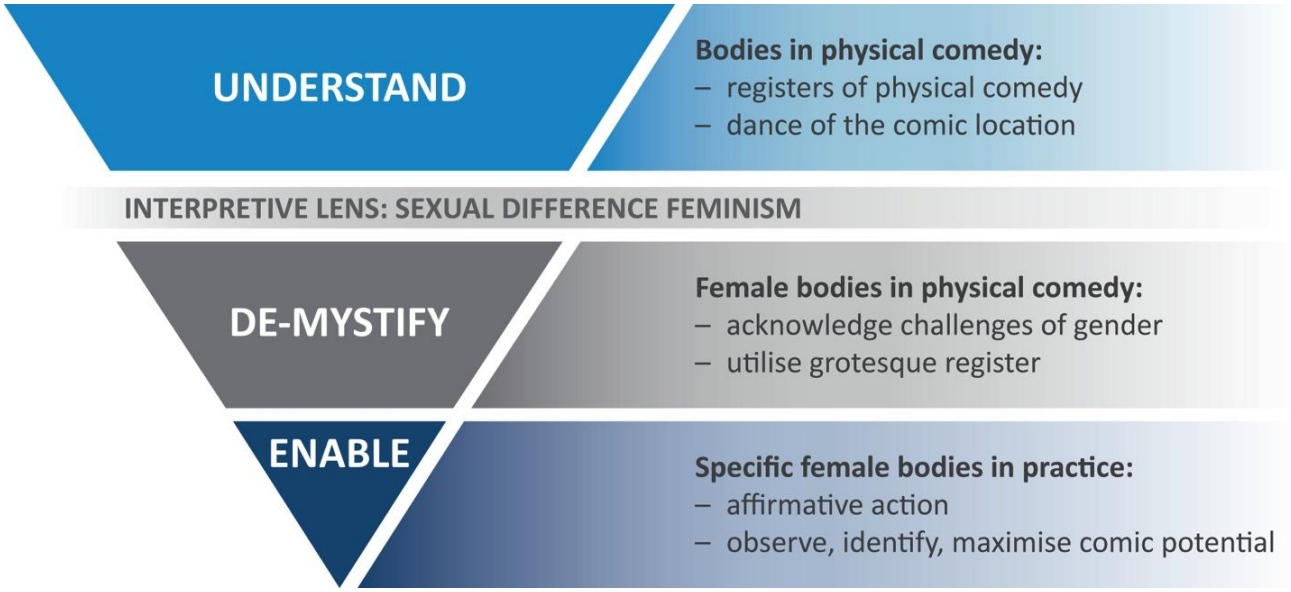
5.1 Synopsis of the work

The marketing blurb for the production introduced the show to its putative audience thusly:

> Meet the Furze Family Variety Artistes! Well, meet Ginger and Red. The others left. Or died. Or became accountants. Nevertheless the show must go on! Together this brother-and-sister team attempt to stage an old school vaudeville extravaganza. With only each other, a faded set, and a lion costume they stole from Cirque De Soleil, they take the audience on a never-to-be-forgotten ride through their dysfunctional relationship, presenting classic comedy routines with a postmodern twist. Channelling Jerry Lewis and Lucille Ball, performers Leon Cain and Helen Cassidy present a virtuosic homage to the Golden Age of physical comedy for a new generation. Only one thing is certain: there will be pies in faces.

5.2 Analysis of process and product

The process used to create this work, as adumbrated in the methodology chapter, can be understood as operating on a continuum of awareness moving from the general to the specific, manifesting as three key strategies – **understanding**, **de-mystifying** and **enabling.** These three terms will thus act as a framework for my analysis of *The Furze Family Variety Hour*, as they explicate how the writing and directing process worked to facilitate successful female performance of physical comedy.



As the diagram illustrates, the process began by utilising a comprehension of the comic body in general and the mechanics of physical comedy. A version of sexual difference feminism incorporating the key theories of Kristeva (1982) and Butler (1990) was then used as an interpretive lens through which to view this general understanding, revealing challenges for the female body in comedy but also, paradoxically, strategies to mitigate these challenges. Finally, the practice focused upon the specific female body that inhabits the particular creative process. To achieve the three key strategies, I developed and applied writing and directorial techniques that this chapter will unpack.

Strategy #1: UNDERSTAND THE MECHANICS OF PHYSICAL COMEDY

Technique: Understand the registers of physical comedy

The concept of the registers of physical comedy, whilst initially generated via theory within the contextual framework (chapter two), was thoroughly tested through the developmental cycles of practice, and was demonstrated in *The Furze Family Variety Hour*. The registers enable the writer/director to accurately pinpoint where the humour in each scene is located, and how it can be enhanced. Each register has its specific uses for creating physical comedy.

The grotesque body

Grotesque bodies are governed by the urges of belly, the genitals and the bowels, rather than the sentient brain. They do violence upon themselves and others in the grip of said urges and the physical clash of these bodies is also a rich source of humour. This is the register that foregrounds humanity's animalistic, uncivilised nature and its atomic unit is the fart joke. The grotesque is the simplest register in which to create basic routines, and thus can be utilised as a starting point when devising comedy.

The disguised body

Here the comedy lies in the deviation from an established norm and engenders a vicarious pleasure that such norms can be temporarily transgressed, as exemplified by the enduring popularity of transvestism in comedy. The strategic use of costume and physical distortions to disguise the body are indeed key tools in the physical comedian's kit. They are an entry point for comic routines in two ways. Firstly, for the performer, whose body responds almost spontaneously to the costuming/direction. Secondly, for the audience, who are guided to superscribe their understandings of bodily norms upon the disguised body they are presented with, and then to laugh at the contrast between the two.

The body as machine

Equating the comic body to a machine is one of the most long-held theories in comic scholarship, stating that the human body is funniest when it most thoroughly takes on the rigidity of a machine. The body as machine register is most useful to explore as a training exercise, or by being invoked as a directing tool to heighten comedy in a given moment, rather than for devising new material.

The body in relation to inanimate objects

The physical reality of the banana peel or cream pie provides an easily-read marker that immediately locates the performance in the comic world. When devising and building comic routines, this is, perhaps, the most useful register, engendering rich

creative possibilities for the physical comedian in terms of both single gags and more complex routines. The simplicity of the set up means that the comedy is immediately accessible; the punch-line can happen as soon as the performer steps onstage and runs into a door. Staging the relationship between bodies and inanimate objects allows the performer to showcase their virtuosity and skill level.

The body in the social world

This register situates the physical comedian in the real world – where normal rules of social interaction operate, and there are penalties for transgressing the rules. Work in this register sees a sliding scale of awareness of the rules governing behaviour in a variety of social settings: work, relationships, leisure time. Bodies operating in this register tend to produce more complex routines, with longer set-ups and potentially deeper, more rounded characters. The register of body in the social world frames the actor's physical presence for a reading that can be dramatic as well as comic. The social world provides the physical comedian with an impetus that can drive comic action, as s/he tries to assimilate the behavioural codes of others.

Technique: Manage the dance of the comic location

When staging a comic duo, the location or focus of the comedy must dance throughout the work, first lighting upon one performer then moving fluidly to the next. This dance of the comic location is made possible by utilising the registers of physical comedy. When the register is clearly established by the creative team, the location of the humour is clear – this means that the audience know where to look and know why to laugh. This dance is organised via structural elements which, in *The Furze Family Variety Hour*, were laid down during the writing and re-drafting phase which ensured that the comic location spent an equal time in each body on stage.

The dramaturgy of shared punch-lines is concerned with relationships, rhythms and ruptures. A comic relationship is established – in the case of *The Furze Family Variety Hour,* this relationship is that of a dysfunctional brother/sister team attempting the challenging task of staging an entire variety show with only two performers. Each scene operates with its own rhythm, either gently or insistently locating the comic

focus with either performer. This rhythm, once established, can be ruptured, thus moving the comic focus, as in the Picnic scene, where Leon as the picnic thief sets up a rhythm and inhabits the comic location, only to have it wrenched away by Helen's surprising violence on discovering the loss of her food.

The dance can also be clarified via an understanding of comic duo structures. *The Furze Family Variety Hour* utilised a variety of gendered combinations of comic duo structures, which I have defined as:

- The funny/ straight relationship
- The high/ low status clown relationship
- The double funny – two clowns attempting a single task.

In the funny/straight comic relationship, the straight performer exists not only to provide a frame or a context for their colleague's comic performance, but often to generate the comedy via the realism of their reaction to the others' antics. Such a relationship is staged in the 2 Drinks 1 Cup scene, a contemporary rendering of Abbott and Costello's *Who's on First?* or Monty Python's *Cheese Shop* sketch, where the female performer plays the straight role, a customer in Leon's hipster coffee shop. In this scene, the humour is often located in Helen's increasingly frustrated response to his obfuscation of her attempts to order coffee. In the Finishing Sentences scene, as noted in the previous chapter, this situation is reversed, and Helen plays the funny role, frustrating Leon's attempts to tell her a story by finishing his sentences incorrectly. Again, the humour is sometimes located in Helen's absurd conclusions to Leon's sentences, but often in Leon's aggravation at her interruptions.

Another duo structure similar but not identical to the straight/funny relationship is that of the high/low status clown duo. The high status comic role inhabits a comic register, however not to the same degree that the low status performer. The locus of humour switches back and forth between the two performers more rapidly than in the straight/ funny combination. This particular combination is showcased in the *Furze Family* show in the Musicians scene, where Helen plays the high status clown to Leon's low status. Both are incompetently dealing with inanimate objects –

musical instruments – however Helen is slightly more able than Leon to negotiate hers. In turn, Leon (playing Red) plays high status to Helen's (playing Ginger) low status clown at the beginning of the Rules of Comedy scene, as this extract from the script demonstrates:

> RED: Right. You see people often ask us, don't they Ginger –
>
> GINGER: Oh yes.
>
> *GINGER runs and tries to jump up on the platform and misses. She acts cool.*
>
> RED: *(Annoyed at being interrupted)* They ask us –
>
> GINGER: OH yes, all the time.
>
> *She tries to jump up again. Misses and falls to the floor, tries to cover it up with a casual position. As RED says the next lines, she awkwardly clambers up the platform, stealing focus with her splayed legs, grabbing onto him, arriving just as he says "The rules if you will."*
>
> RED: All the time they ask us, how do you do it? How do you make audiences from all over the world laugh? Well tonight just for you ladies and gentlemen, we are prepared to reveal our secrets.
>
> RED: Our comedy secrets. The rules if you will.
>
> *RED jumps down. GINGER, who has been grabbing his face, collapses suddenly onto the platform, hitting her head loudly and painfully.*
> (Boyle 2014)

The final duo combination utilised in this work is what I have termed the double funny, which situates two equally low-status, equally naive clowns in the same scenario. In the case of *The Furze Family Variety Hour*, this combination is invoked in the Chase scene, where Red chases Ginger after their genitals are revealed to have been accidentally swapped. The two low-status clowns create a chaotic stage picture utilising the grotesque and inanimate objects registers, sending props, cream pies, and eventually fake genitals flying anarchically throughout the space.

The first strategy of this writing/directing process was concerned with the craft of physical comedy in general. When these structural elements are interpreted through a sexual difference feminist lens, the focus is drawn, unsurprisingly, to the female body, first in a general, then a specific fashion. Applying this lens helps dismantle the challenges of gender through two key strategies I have termed de-mystification and enabling:

Strategy #2: DE-MYSTIFY THE FEMALE BODY

Technique: Utilise the grotesque register

Situating the female comic body in the grotesque register, with its use of exposed genitalia and violence, is a key de-mystification technique. Comic violence debunks the heavy body – undoes the potential reading of woman as precious/strange womb - thus allowing the female body to fully participate in the comic narrative. In *The Furze Family Variety Hour,* the female body was allowed to perform violence and have violence done to it. In the Picnic, 2 Drinks 1 Cup and Rules of Comedy scenes, the female body initiated comic violence through slapstick techniques – kicks, punches and idiosyncratic blows such as shoe-throws, a neck twist and, most powerfully, her own spittle. In the Vomit scene (a sub-scene in the Rules of Comedy), the female body revelled in her own, and her partner's (imaginary) vomit, playing with it, splashing in it – even rubbing it into her skin. Most significantly, this body was situated in the grotesque register whilst enrolled as lover; her womb, with its potential to endow her as mother was acknowledged, but did not preclude her full engagement with the grotesque. In this way, the grotesque register was a vehicle for confronting the weight of abjection that challenges the female comic body.

Technique: Utilise the body in disguise

When the female physical comedian self-consciously highlights putative flaws in her appearance for comic effect, a common technique for female physical comedians as identified in the conceptual framework, she is really saying "Isn't it funny that I'm not beautiful the way women are meant to be". In doing so, she reifies a singular, restrictive concept of gender performance. In contrast, the female performer in the

Furze Family Variety Hour knowingly and with virtuosic control played as beautiful, or ugly or both. Thus, by the very act of her disguise, she staked a claim for her own, undisguised body, as being worthy to occupy the normative subject space. The episodic structure of *The Furze Family Variety Hour* allowed each gendered body on stage to costume and re-costume according to the needs of the particular scene. This meant that throughout the work, the female body assumed multiple disguises, some traditionally beautiful, some less so. Helen appears in her base costume, as a classic vaudeville chanteuse, as a glamorous lion tamer, as a man and as a woman dressed as a man dressed as a woman.

The nude suit device in the Rules of Comedy scene worked to crash through, or de-mystify issues of body or beauty blocks, by simultaneously covering and uncovering bodies in an explicitly non-sexual way – again exploiting a paradox. Male and female bits were on display, not as sexual or beautiful passive artefacts, but rather, actively inhabiting the grotesque and disguised registers. The humour was located in the performance of disguise – marked by the joy in the eyes of the performer, or the pleasure in Hopkins' (2013) terms – rather than the performance of supposed flaws. The distinctive characteristics of the disguised register foreground the final technique of de-mystification:

Technique: Acknowledge that gender is a performance

The director must understand and acknowledge how socially constructed notions of gender load any reading of the female body and how this weight of meaning challenges the operation of physical comedy. However these challenges can be re-inflected, inverted and played with, teased apart and critiqued for comic effect, as the creative practice demonstrated. In other words, gendered differences can be treated theatrically. The performance of gender in all its artifice and absurdity is openly acknowledged and in this way the challenge is defused.

In *The Furze Family Variety Hour* the process of paradoxical acknowledgement was multi-faceted. Firstly, the two bodies on stage were presented utilising signifiers that underlined the gendered bodies adopted by the performers. In other words, in their everyday lives, Cassidy and Cain identify as bodies gendered female and male

respectively, and their base costumes strategically acknowledged and performed their particular "everyday" construction of gender. The female body was in this way not apologising for its presence onstage via a complicated drag act. Both bodies were presented in similar fabrics and were gendered but not explicitly sexual.

Secondly, gender was explicitly theatricalised via in two key scenes; the Dance of Love and the nude scene at the climax of the Rules of Comedy. In the Dance of Love, each actor performed embellished and overtly artificial presentations of gender; performances which unravelled as the scene appeared to veer out of their control.

(Left to right: Leon Cain and Helen Cassidy, playing with gender. The Furze Family Variety Hour, JWCOCA. Photo: Lukas Davidson 2014.)

With increasing speed, the key costume indicators of stole, jacket and hat were swapped, layered, mixed and mis-matched with accompanying vocal and physical performances of gender resulting in a comic gender mash-up that left Helen onstage, ostensibly enrolled as a "woman" believing she is naked, whilst fully dressed and wearing an ostentatiously false moustache:

(Helen Cassidy, thoroughly confused by the dance of gender. The Furze Family Variety Hour, JWCOCA. Photo: Lukas Davidson 2014.)

Similarly in the Rules of Comedy scene, the artificiality of the nude suits and associated attachments staged the constructed nature of gender; its ability to be performed. In the unpredictable chaos of the performance season, the fake phallus often proved too heavy for its Velcro backing and dropped into a lap of an unsuspecting audience member, who became part of an impromptu game of Piggy-in-the-Middle. Gender, in the world of *The Furze Family Variety Hour*, was nothing but a game that all were free to play. Even as heteronormative order seemed apparently restored after the final swapping of genitals, on several nights during the season, performance had the last word, as gravity and the razzle-dazzle of the final dance number conspired to overcome the adhesive and Leon finished the show displaying two strips of Velcro in the vital area.

Just as the nude suits approached the constructs of beauty/ ugliness in a playful spirit by theatricalising the curves and declivities of each gendered body onstage, they also teased apart the constructs of gender to acknowledge that they are, ultimately just that – constructs, or *disguises* that the physical comedian can manipulate for comic purposes.

Strategy #3: ENABLE THE SPECIFIC FEMALE BODY

As de-mystification works to defuse the challenge of the heavy body, the strategy of enabling disarms the challenges I characterised as the neutral fallacy and the ideological clash. The first technique in this strategy re-purposes a term borrowed from liberal feminism, namely, affirmative action (Tong 2008). The liberal feminist paradigm differs slightly from that which frames my research, as sexual difference feminism is less focused upon political activism in the public sphere. Like its application in policy making and employment strategies, affirmative action in my practice is conceived as a temporary technique, a means to an end (Tong 2008, 33) that focuses on the female comic body in order to redress an historical imbalance within the practice of physical comedy. However, affirmative action in the rehearsal room does not attempt to reconfigure power structures in society in general, but rather the power structures inherent in the comic form. This is a slight, but significant distinction, foreshadowed by data extracted from the interview with Lucy Hopkins, highlighted in the conceptual framework, where she posited that a performer should aim to be excellent, rather than to free him/herself from social conditioning (2013, l. 18–29).

In other words, the work does not aim to "shake things up" in broadly societal terms, a purpose Finney (1994, 9) claims for "women's humour" (as cited earlier) but rather to shake up the form itself. This re-frames the debate around comedy and transgression that underpins what I termed the ideological clash, whilst simultaneously addressing the gendered imbalance in comedy resulting from the neutral fallacy. However the "shake up" not only has implications for the form of physical comedy but also, as the Hopkins interview inferred, is directed at the individual performer in a specific process. The enabling strategy therefore aims to make the specific female body as funny as possible and as such, is a truly transgressive act.

Technique: Practice affirmative action as writer/ director.

Within the writing process, affirmative action is linked to the notion of the shared punch-line and the dance of the comic location. This means structuring scenes

around known skill sets for female comic bodies and actively managing the casting of specific roles, to ensure the comic focus is equally shared. However, this active casting is a continual process – as rehearsal in physical comedy necessarily involves constant additions to the written script; as a form it is fluid, never static, constantly generating new punch-lines. The director must manage this continually shifting process to ensure the female body claims an equal share of these nascent punch-lines.

In the case of *The Furze Family Variety Hour* this involved casting Helen as the Lion Tamer, as the sentence finisher in the Finishing each others' sentences routine and as the host in the Dance of Love scene. Verbal punch-lines that emerged from improvisation were deliberately assigned to Helen. Leon's dance with the blow-up doll was modified to allow Helen's character to play an active part, thus situating her body in the grotesque register, as she unplugged Leon's blow up doll, then animated her to attack Leon.

Affirmative action was also vital to the architecture of the rehearsal room and process, operating upon multiple levels, taking into account the need to provide a balance of supportive and challenging directorial feedback. The character of the rehearsal room combined moments of support with moments of high pressure in order to maximise comic success for each performer. My directorial practice shifted between providing feedback to the comic duo, to feeding back to each of them individually, developing specific techniques that subtly validated Helen's work both publicly, with the whole creative team and in one-to-one dialogue.

Technique: Observation, identification and maximisation

Enabling also means identifying what makes a specific female body funny in a given process. This technique can be broken down into three actions: observation, identification and maximising. In *The Furze Family Variety Hour* process, I continually observed the specificities of Helen's body in each of the registers, identifying when the comedy was located with her and maximising those moments.

The scene which became the crucible for enabling Helen as a specific female comic body, thus affording her control of the comic location, was the Lion Tamer. This scene called for a delicate balance of ineptitude (as her character has ostensibly been forced at the last minute to perform a lion taming routine *sans* lion) and showmanship. The disguised register was the basis for her performance, springboarded by my stage directions in the script:

> *GINGER surprises RED by appearing onstage, dressed as a glamorous lion tamer, with whip and stool. She is owning it. She whips him off stage and cues music.* (Boyle 2014, 16–7)

In rehearsal when Helen donned the leopard print hotpants Josh designed at my instigation, the familiar joy of disguise (Boyle 2013, Hopkins 2013) lit her eyes, and she began speaking in an inexplicable Spanish accent whilst developing a feisty impatience with her putative audience volunteer. This method of inhabiting the disguised register was utterly idiosyncratic, due to Helen's specific comic presence. As director, I identified this idiosyncrasy and, throughout the rehearsal process, maximised it through strategic direction.

(Helen Cassidy as Ginger, The Lion Tamer. The Furze Family Variety Hour, JWCOCA. Photo: Lukas Davidson 2014.)

In the performance season this scene continued to develop, with Helen's body achieving an hilarious juxtaposition of ungainliness and sexiness, culminating in the gloriously funny image of her touching the "lion" when putting out imaginary flames

with her oversized, deliberately daggy oven glove. It can be seen that the strategy of enabling entails focusing on the specifics of the actual physical body, but also the specifics of how the particular performer inhabits each register of comedy.

5.3 Conclusion

The examinable work demonstrated how my inverted pyramid of writing and directorial strategies worked to facilitate female comic performance in a mainstage context. Its six-night performance season represented how the challenges of gender in physical comedy might be defused, with the female body accorded an equal share of the punch-lines.

As the culminating piece of practice from a number of creative cycles, *The Furze Family Variety Hour* staged the findings of this research project in bodied form, as theatrical performance. The next chapter will present these findings in written form, thus summarising my discursive claim for the significance of the study (in Haseman and Mafe's terms, 2009, 226) for practitioners and scholars in the field of physical comedy.

6.0 Findings of study

This chapter presents the findings of the study as a whole, explicating how this research has generated new knowledge; a contribution to the field that is centred on the creative process of a writer/ director of physical comedy. This project was predicated upon the research question:

> *How can a writer/director facilitate successful female performance of physical comedy in a mainstage context?*

Answering this driving question has produced three key findings:

Firstly, the study has produced a framework for understanding the strategies used by physical comedians across a wide range of performances, genres and media. This is a system of bodily registers, borrowing a term from Foucault (1977), that operate, either singly or in overlapping spheres, to produce physical comedy: the grotesque body, the disguised body, the body as machine, the body in relation to inanimate objects and the body in the social world.

Secondly, the study has identified key registers within which the writer/ director can facilitate successful female performance of physical comedy. Whilst all five registers of physical comedy are necessary, it is the grotesque and disguised registers that are most efficacious in dealing with the challenges associated with the female comic body. This finding links the key theories of Kristeva (1982) and Butler (1990); the grotesque register certainly showcases the abject in Kristeva's terms, however such a performance is not inextricably linked to the female body since gender itself is understood as a performance. As the grotesque register confronts abjection, the disguised register pokes performative fun at it.

This positioning of the grotesque modulates the understanding explicated in Mary Russo's (1995) keystone text. Russo's female grotesque is a boundary rider, a high-wire act, but, most significantly, a static representation of these figures – an image of a laughing, swollen-bellied hag captured permanently in terracotta. If such a figure does move, she is positioned on a trapeze, flying high above the action, dancing on the margins, on the edge of the spotlight. In contrast, I offer the concept

of the comic female grotesque as temporal performance on the mainstage, a lived experience that performs grotesqueries as virtuosic disguises. These are comic disguises, therefore they are explicitly artificial, able to be knowingly assumed and, since they occur in live performance, to be knowingly discarded. Russo's grotesque figure utilises performative abjection (Covino 2004, 7) however, since the image is fixed, the Othering process engendered by this is permanent – the grotesque female remains, defiantly, in her grotto. In my practice the comic female body itself is not grotesque, rather, it assumes the disguise of the grotesque, and in this way theatricalises it, makes it playful, makes it live and lived.

Thirdly, the study has identified the importance of the specific female body in comic performance. Abjection is useful in understanding the grotesque and the female comic body in general; however it does not entirely explain the lived experience of being a specific female body in a specific rehearsal room. Quotidian expectations of gender performance affect the process of making physical comedy, but can be ameliorated via a form of affirmative action on the part of the writer/director. This affirmative action works to enable the actual lived body in the process of creating physical comedy, proactively identifying moments where the specific female body can inhabit the registers of comedy, whilst always acknowledging that lived experience itself is both a construct and a constant performance.

6.2 Qualification of findings/ limitation of the study

It is important to acknowledge a key pattern in the data that serves to qualify the findings, particularly around the practice of affirmative action. This pattern uncovered what I have termed gendered self-confidence issues that problematised this assumption of practice. At various points during each creative cycle, the female member of the performance team expressed feelings of personal inadequacy. These feelings manifested in various forms throughout the devising/rehearsal process. Some were unacknowledged by the group and were able to be measured only in close observation and subsequent reflection – certain facial expressions, small elisions in speech leading to withdrawals from conversations – others were more overtly expressed. Importantly, however, there was a clear gap between the felt

truths of the performer/devisors, and the perceived truths of observers of the performance outcomes. The performers felt unfunny, but the audience, as represented by the critical friend (Broadway 2013) and a reviewer of the performance season (Coward 2014) thought otherwise. Thus these feelings of inadequacy affected the process rather than the product – negatively impacting the moments of creativity and play that comprised the development period.

Extrapolating the significance of such feelings leads me to conclude that, despite the success of this research project in showcasing the female comic body in a mainstage context, these female performers may continue to approach physical comedy with compromised self-confidence, or be less inclined to take on similar roles in physical comedy, thus perpetuating the problematics surrounding the female comic body. The power structures that challenge the female comic project were always in the room with us, despite the application of directorial techniques developed via the emerging findings of the study. In other words, the rehearsal room was not, indeed, could not be, an ideology-free space, and thus the practice of affirmative action had a limited efficacy in dealing with wider issues of gendered self-confidence in physical comedy. This qualification demonstrates the limitations of the study whilst suggesting areas for future research. Are there other techniques that could address this issue of gendered self-confidence with greater success? Could a program of long-term training in physical comedy skills work to re-condition entrenched notions of gender and comedy for female physical comedians? Future research projects could potentially test some of these hypotheses in practice.

6.3 Conclusion

Whilst the findings modulate Russo's understanding of the grotesque, they also serve to valorise what I termed her "third way" of understanding comedy (chapter two). In this conception, comedy can neither be conceived as absolutely transgressive, nor completely conservative. Rather, both readings jostle with each other to make meaning from this enduringly popular dramatic form. Thus is the discussion propelled back to Foucault (Dreyfus, Rabinow and Foucault 1983) and his assertion that counter-cultures and their concomitant challenges to dominant power systems will always play out their resistance on the margins, eventually affecting

change in the centre. In the spirit of Foucault, my practice dances from the margins to the centre and back again, playing with dominant forms of power in physical comedy to showcase a new understanding of the erstwhile marginalised female comic body.

From Foucault, ineluctably, to Judith Butler, and, as I cited at the outset of my study, her call to come down from the citadels and engage in sustained, interventionist practice as well as theory. (Butler 2004, 204). This statement is significant, as it would indeed have been possible to approach this particular research concern without engaging in practice, that is, via an analysis of selected contemporary performance using the key theoretical lenses of Kristeva and Butler, as intimated in the contextual review (chapter two). In contrast, following Butler's own submission, it has been through action, sustained labour and practice – the presentation of *The Furze Family Variety Hour* – that this study's claims to knowledge have primarily been made manifest.

7.0 Conclusion

The study has investigated how gender affects contemporary physical comedy by staging a conversation between different ways of knowing. The key issues of the study emerged from an ongoing engagement with theory, as outlined in the conceptual framework in chapter two. Firstly, a deeper understanding of how the body operates in comedy led to the development of the registers concept, which was tested in practice and found to be valid. Secondly, the complexities of the female comic project were investigated via theory and the notion of three broad challenges of gender emerged. Three cycles of creative practice joined the conversation, punctuated by a series of interviews with key practitioners. Throughout, each mode of research and each way of knowing affected and changed the others, as practice suggested avenues for deeper engagement with theory, and data from interviews affected modes of practice.

The outcome of this research conversation is a new piece of theatrical performance, namely, *The Furze Family Variety Hour*, which demonstrates how the challenges of gender in physical comedy are able to be defused via an understanding of how the female body can be read in performance and via specific dramaturgical and directorial techniques.

7.1 Success of the research project

As the abstract for the study noted, this project aimed to create a new theatrical physical comedy that features the work of both a female and a male performer, crafted so that the female performer is not merely a prop, but enjoys an equal share of the punch-lines. The performance was to have been deemed successful if it was programmed in a mainstage venue and received positive audience response in the form of critical reviews.

By these measures, *The Furze Family Variety Hour* was successful. Multiple forms and genres of comedy combined with both traditional and contemporary vaudeville/ variety acts to create a work that showcased the virtuosic physical comedy skills of

the two performers and created a new male/female comic duo. A published review validated the aims of the creative team:

> The Furze Family Variety Hour promises pies in faces. And it's pies in faces we get, even if for no other reason than "pies in faces are funny." Also, nakedness is funny. But this kind of family friendly "nakedness", and a wild rumpus dished up as the finale, are even funnier than you're imagining… These two multi-faceted performers are old-school style truly delightful; they're cheeky and a little bit naughty. ...
>
> A classic picnic skit, perfectly measured and polished, allows a new relationship to blossom and honours the timeless comic traditions of slapstick, surprise and the sharing of secrets or asides with the audience. This sequence highlights the director's light hand and her trust in the actors, as well as her attention to minute detail and comic timing. (Coward 2014)

In addition, the work has been commissioned for a tour of major centres in Queensland in 2016 via the state's touring mechanism, arTour. Thus, the study has advanced my own knowledge and understanding of the field whilst developing my sustainable practice as a professional artist.

7.2 Significance of the study

Female practitioners of comedy sometimes advocate a pragmatic 'shut up, let's get on with it' attitude when queried about the issues inherent in the female comic project, from Tina Fey (2012) who sends her questioners to the cheese table, to New Zealand comic Michele A'Court (2014) who "never wants to be asked the question again", to British stand up Catie Wilkins, who posits that "ultimately we should stop having the debate at all, as it makes it look there might be a real issue in terms of talent, and there isn't" (Moon 2012, 220). Interviews with female physical comedians that have formed important research sites in this study reveal a similar pattern: Lucy Hopkins (2013, l.308-9) says – "it's not like women have it so bad – everyone has it so bad, it's just that's a particular struggle, let's liberate it" and Liz Skitch (2013, l.100-1) says "women who think they have to work harder than men for laughs are only holding themselves back".

The tenor of these arguments seems to be that making comedy – literary, stand-up or physical – is challenging; doesn't mean it can't be done. I would argue that the corollary is also true. There are dilemmas at the heart of the female comic project

that must be acknowledged in order for this project to reach its fullest potential. Through understanding the challenges of her gender, all frames become available for the female comic body, and she is, in Lucy Hopkins' own terms, "free"; to be beautiful, ugly, everything – to be taken seriously and thus to be seriously funny.

The young woman (me) who, in 1999, stripped to her underwear in a public place in order to get a laugh has developed and grown over the past fifteen years of practice and research. In the last three years, over the life of this research project, the concerns raised by that awkward performance have been centre stage, as it were, and played out in a series of creative practice cycles and ongoing engagement with theory. The result of this intensive focus has been a significant development in my praxis. I have a deeper understanding of how physical comedy is structured and how comic duos, specifically male-female duos, operate. My directorial practice has grown to encapsulate ways of facilitating successful female physical comedy, and significantly, an understanding of why that young woman lifted her hand to shield her boyfriend's eyes all those years ago. On that fateful day, the performance of my gender did, as I hypothesised at the outset of my research, compromise my performance of physical comedy. However, as this study has demonstrated, positioning the female grotesque body as temporal performance and knowing disguise can re-frame this hitherto problematic dual performance of gender and physical comedy.

In this regard, *Bits and Bumps* has significance not only for my own praxis, but for the wider field of practice and research in comedy and gender, as has been demonstrated by the publication of two articles based on the interim findings of this study in the peer-reviewed journals *eJournalist* and *Comedy Studies*. The framework for understanding physical comedy which this study has developed will be a tool for analysis for scholars in this field and a method of practice for artists. Most significantly, this new positioning of the female grotesque body will allow practitioners to develop new work where the performance of woman and the performance of physical comedy can co-exist in the same body. I will conclude with an imagined future of practice beyond the challenges of gender, where the act of

facilitating female comic performance is no longer a transgressive act, for by making it laughable, we have, finally, truly taken the female comic body seriously.

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List of Appendices

Appendix 1: Performance text

The Furze Family Variety Hour

By Bridget Boyle

Music by David Megarrity and Sam Vincent with Kellee Green

Lyrics by David Megarrity

Co-devised by Bridget Boyle, Leon Cain & Helen Cassidy with Liz Skitch

ORDER OF SCENES:

Pre-show – popcorn sellers/ balloon makers

Duo/ introductions – 3.5 mins

The Picnic 6 mins

You May as well smile song (GINGER) 1.5

You May as well fart song (RED) 1.5

Two drinks 1 cup 3

The musicians 5

The lion tamer 5

Finishing sentences 5

The dance of love 3

Wendy 4

Balloon 4

The Rules of Comedy 9

Chase/fight 5

Sidekick 2

NOTE: every time the slide reveals a new scene title, linking music plays.

An old fashioned vaudeville stage. Curtains at the back, with a circular logo spelling The Furze Family Variety Hour. Spotlights roaming over the space. Footlights. The whole shebang. A drum kit. A door.

PRE-SHOW

Ginger and Red enter the space through the audience, as popcorn vendors/ balloon modellers. They are roaming through the audience, interacting with them. Becomes a competition for who can get the audience's attention. Ginger is flirting with audience members, causing Red to be jealous.

Soon, audience are in, Ginger notices it seems a bit empty – where's the music? They confer.. Ginger goes out the back and rummages – finds a small suitcase – pulling out items (First Aid kit, Dad's ashes, rubber chicken, cream pie). They develop a short routine throwing them to each other (possibly a juggle) before pulling out a remote control clicker. They point it at the screen.

ACT ONE

SLIDE: The Furze Family Variety Hour Potluck Spectacular.

SQ- BOOMING CUE MUSIC

They click the clicker again.

SLIDE: DUO

SQ-

V/o – Ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Furze Family Variety Hour.

Featuring the Furze Family.

Performing a Variety Hour.

V/o: Please welcome to the stage… Ginger Furze. And her brother Red Furze

Duo *(Megarrity/Vincent)* **DR 5**

A1 Duo: not one or three but two-o

One to one's the perfect ratio

We know the show from go to woe

B1 you pick me up now

When you trip me up now

We'll take the pay off when we bow

A2 Duo: you and me go quid pro quo

There's only moments to go

Between hello and cheerio

B2 a foil and a foe

Catching lines that you throw

We're brighter in each other's shadows

A BR (low)	**B BR (high)**
I have found	I have found
With your assistance, friend	With your assistance, friend
That comedy…..	That comedy is tragedy….
…plus timing…	….in the end

Repeats:

A1 & B1 [combined]

A2 & B2 [combined]

BOTH: "Adieu-o"

Bow.

GINGER (the boss for now) clicks a device, like a slide show operator which clicks the screen image to reveal the next scene title:

SLIDE: THE PICNIC

SQ- Linking music –

GINGER changes for her scene, aided by RED – who gets her props on her clicks. RED crosses with a pie. When ready, she cues the music.

SQ – Picnic score

She is dressed in a polka dot circle skirt and stunning red heels, and she carries a picnic basket**.**

She indicates the sign – The Picnic – that's me!

She plays around with finding the right spot. Checks the wind. Takes off shoes

Tries to set up skirt. Spins around to get the perfect circle.

Sets up picnic – water bottle, with cup. Little containers with olives on the top, cheese on sticks in the middle and little sandwiches.

Lastly, her cup cake.

SQ – Bird call

Notices birds. Huddles under basket.

Finally gets out cherry from her cleavage.

RED enters, does a cross, notices her. He crosses back, pretending to run, and then takes a break. She notices him. He notices her dots, realises he has a dotty scarf. He stretches – looks around oh hello, you have a picnic! And I have a dotty scarf like you. Does 3 x look whilst she finds the right olive – she doesn't catch him looking, he buries head in newspaper

SQ - Bird call

She is scared, he offers to protect her and finds himself on her blanket

- she offers an olive – because he was so brave.

- He mimes – no I couldn't possibly, oh yes actually I could. They both eat one, eyes locked, she is overcome and looks away.
- It is delicious! He reaches for another, she catches him and he grabs her hand and kisses it, thereby masking a steal of a couple of olives.
- Again she is overcome and looks away.
- He nabs all olives but one.
- She notices their loss, and is very confused.
- Gallantly, he offers her the last one, she hesitates, so he eats it himself.
- Gets out cheese on the sticks.
- She eats one with much enjoyment.

- Holds one up. He wants it, so points to something in the distance whilst he eats it off the stick. She stabs herself with the stick – mystery! Where has it gone? She looks down her cleavage. She takes another, and goes to eat it when:
- He finds something amazing in the newspaper x 3
- She is intrigued. Is drawn to look at it.
- Whilst her attention is taken, he takes cheese. Keeps doing so, until she feels his hand – runs up his hand and touches his face
- AAARGH
- She grabs cheese, he grabs paper. How dare you!
- He moves further away, making her think she was in the wrong. She feels bad and offers him a cheese on a stick to say sorry.
- She gets out sandwich.
- Goes for a drink, and he steals one.
- She notices loss – he mimes birds.

SQ – bird call

- She is distressed and starts packing up, after huddling under basket.
- He helps her pack up, stowing stuff away as he does so. He tries to get the cupcake but she grabs it at the last minute. He covers the basket with his scarf.
- She stands up, holding her cupcake and the blanket.
- She has too much in her hands, so he takes the cupcake, giving her the basket.
- He says – oh that's my scarf, takes it and runs off.
- She throws her shoe at him.
- He screams, stumbles back on with the shoe heel stuck in his eye. She retrieves the cupcake, wrenches the shoe out, wipes it on him, then kicks him over. He falls off stage.
- She eats her cupcake. Tra la la!

Sq – comedy sting

She takes a bow, putting the cupcake and shoes in her basket as she does. Indicates RED, who re-enters for his bow with GINGER's shoes and uke – "what was that? That hurt". He puts GINGER's shoes for the next

scene on the platform. She has taken another bow and shed her picnic skirt.

She shrugs innocently “What?” whilst throwing her skirt on his head.

RED clicks the slide:

SLIDE: YOU MAY AS WELL SMILE

SQ - linking music –

Meanwhile, GINGER puts her shoes on.

RED sees the slide and realises he can get revenge. He hands GINGER her uke and goes off, plotting.

GINGER sets herself up for the song and cues the sound guy.

Sq -Linking music stops.

GINGER:

You May As Well Smile (Megarrity/Green) Dr 5

Intro V2

You May As Well Smile (Megarrity/Green) [transposed chords] Tuesday, August 19, 2014

Intro V2

Am *E7*

When the sunshine’s gone and a cold wind blows,

Am *G*
the sky is hanging grey and low,

C *F* *C* *E7*
the nimbus is all cumulo

A7 *Dm*
the days pass slow with nothing to show

G7 *C*
and everything’s is so…’so-so’

Dm *Dm (add B)*
there s only one way to go
E7

so here's my motto…

GINGER cues the sound

SQ – Smile backing track

C CaddG#

1 you may as well smile

CaddA A7

cause we're all stuck here together here for a while

Dsus7 D7 F Fm G7

the reasons to frown all fall down in a pile

(tacet) so you may as well…

2 …may as well smile

'cause we'll all make our exit in single file

Dsus7 D G7

the line could be short, or a queue of a mile

C C7

so you may as well smile

F Fm

BR it may be overcast but it won't last

C A7

Most of those clouds are toasted by sunshine

Dsus7 D F

so we should be kind

Fm G7

while there's still time

(tacet) so you may as well…

3 …may as well smile

whether you pull a bride or a trolley up the aisle

Dsus7 D G7 Asus 7 A7

you could slip, you could trip but you'll do it with style

so come on…

D sus 7 D7 G7 C

you may as well… you may as well smile.

To BR & Coda

When she finishes RED comes in applauding. He takes her uke.

RED: Ladies and gentlemen, Ginger.

GINGER takes her bow and exits.

RED sticks on a sticky note over the top of the sign, to make it:

YOU MAY AS WELL FART

This text is obviously handwritten by RED. It is revenge for her hurting him in the Picnic scene.

GINGER hears him tuning up and sticks her head back in. Show must go on!

RED mimes playing a ukulele in the style of GINGER.

You May As Well Fart.

[revised lyrics of 'You May As Well Smile' (Green/Megarrity)]

1 You may as well fart

But do it onstage and then you can call it art

It's not from the heart

But from deeper parts

So you may as well fart

BR [?] Some are shy, some are bold

Some of them are quite musical

Only a fart

Can soothe a soul

Can soothe arse-hole

2

it takes all sorts

we love the ones that are loud, explosive and short

and the ones that come bit by bit (that you hope aren't shit)

….when you walk.

Rpt v1 [for the time being]

Coda [?]

You may as well *

Wooah

You may as well *

Woooah

You may as well *

You may as well *

*=raspberry

SQ – little cute fart

SQ – massive fart

RED mimes doing a massive fart with follow through that rips his anus open.

RED: Get mum!

GINGER: Mum's dead.

They have a mini stand off. Oh no! Off script! Quick, back to the show.

Rapprochement – for now

ACT TWO

Ginger clicks the slide.

SQ – linking music –

SLIDE: TWO DRINKS ONE CUP

RED likes doing this one! Pops off stage, comes back with a pie, as does GINGER. They swap pies in the middle and take them off stage. RED gets his hipster glasses from offstage.

RED: Next? Hi, morning how are you?

GINGER: Good. Thanks. Can I get a latte-

RED: Would you like some food or drink?

GINGER: Just drinks. I'd like a latte-

RED: So would you like to start off with some coffees?

GINGER: I'd like a latte and a flat white in a cup please.

RED: What, you want a latte and a flat white in a cup?

GINGER: Yes please.

RED: In the same cup?

GINGER: No no, I meant can I have them both in cups please, not in mugs?

RED: You want them both in cups?

GINGER: Yes.

RED: Well the latte comes in a glass, so do you want that or not?

GINGER: No no, that's fine. – (quick)

RED: So you don't want a latte?

GINGER: Yes, no a glass would be fine.

RED: A glass of what, red, white?

GINGER: A glass of latte. I mean, a latte in a glass please.

RED: They only come in glasses.

GINGER: Yeah, no that's fine.

RED: So yes you want it, or no you don't.

GINGER: Yes I want a latte in a glass. And a flat white.

RED: Do you want that in a glass too?

GINGER: No.

RED: 'Cos that's a latte.

GINGER: Yeah-

RED: So two lattes, and a glass of red or white?

GINGER: No, yes, forget that.

RED: Oh, so you don't want anything? Next?

GINGER: No, yes

RED: Hi, how are you going?

GINGER: Yes, I want a-

RED: Drinks, coffees?

GINGER: I want a latte and a flat white in a cup.

RED: What, in the same cup?

GINGER: No…

RED: ‘Cos I could probably fit them both in a mug, if that’s what you really want.

GINGER: Yeah, no I don’t want mugs.

RED: That’s good, ‘cos lattes don’t actually come in mugs. They come in glasses.

GINGER: Yes, no. Don’t worry about the mugs.

RED: Oh, so you’re right then. Next?

GINGER: Listen.

RED: Hi, you again.

GINGER: Please listen. I would like a latte in a glass

RED: They only come in glasses.

GINGER: Yeah, no I know.

RED: Yes you know, or no you don’t know? Oh did you about the specials? You can get a BLT focaccia or a bacon lettuce tomato on focaccia bread.

GINGER: Look can you just bring me the latte and the flat white?

RED: So cancel the focaccia?

GINGER: I don’t want any food.

RED: Ok that’s food done. Any drinks, coffees?

GINGER: (grabbing his finger and pressing his buttons) CAN YOU BRING ME A LATTE AND A FLAT WHITE PLEASE?

RED: Sure, would you like the flat white in a cup or a mug?

GINGER breaks his finger, pulls his arm around his back and knocks him to the ground, then gets him in a headlock

RED: Only kidding! I’ll bring them right out.

GINGER: And make sure put extra chocolate powder on the top of that flat white, cos that's the way I like it.

RED: Chocolate powder? That's a cappuccino.

GINGER screams and breaks his neck. Spits on him.

Sq – comedy sting into music

She bows, and RED pops his head up. Just as he is about to get up, GINGER goes as if to help him and kicks him "accidentally" in the groin.

GINGER clicks the slide, through

SLIDE: FALDO THE MAGNIFICENT

SLIDE: THE HUMAN SHIELD

SLIDE: THE FURZE FAMILY MUSICAL INTERLUDE

SQ: Linking music –

GINGER nips offstage to get her uke and a pie. She crosses with the pie to SL and returns with the music folder.

RED: (sees the title of the slide, sotto voce, nervous) What? We never do this one. This was Uncle Joe's part.

They look to the heavens.

GINGER: (backing him into the drumkit) Joe's gone. Just read the music.

RED: But I'm not a musician.

GINGER: You don't have to be, you're playing the drums.

RED approaches the drums with trepidation. He is overwhelmed by the size and complexity of the drumkit. Spends time with each instrument, getting caught in the cymbals, knocking something over.

RED: Sorry. (looking to the heavens) Sorry Joe!

Finds a pie in the kit, which GINGER stows off stage. RED is tuning his horn, amongst other time-wasting activities. This annoys GINGER. She is about to play when.. he doesn't know what piece. He takes the music over to her, then she does her finger-licking routine.

He takes the music back but accidentally shuts the book.

GINGER starts playing the song. She waits for RED to play his part – apparently a crash on the cymbals at the end of a phrase.

Each time he goes as if to play and then makes it clear that he's still setting up. He meticulously sets up each instrument, coming back to each of them, testing his embouchure on the horn, and the set up on the cymbals and bells, etc. Occasionally he notes his spot on the music – silently counting to himself one two three four, two two three four, etc.

She gets faster and faster and finally he comes in, scaring the bejeesus out of her. (maybe falls into drums)

He crashes loudly on the last 2 beats of her phrase. He is complacent – this is easy. Then he notes on his music that a trickier part is coming up. He has to hit the last three notes of her phrase, this time starting with the small cymbal, bass drum, big cymbal. This goes on, as his music directs him to add more and more notes to the phrase – the bell, cymbal, drum, cymbal. Etc until he must play them all. This becomes harder and harder and the music, like before is speeding up.

He gets the hang of it and starts to take over, wresting control until he gives a huge percussion solo.

GINGER is bored and sits on the stairs.

RED pauses – as if waiting for GINGER to come in.

They play a last note.

They play the game of bowing and smiling so the audience can't see what they are saying to each other (a la Anchorman)

RED: I think Joe would have been really happy with that. Nailed it. (he goes to link arms with GINGER)

GINGER: Don't touch me.

She goes to click clicker – he mimes – I got this one, and she exits.

He clicks through several,

SLIDE: BALLS A'PLENTY

SLIDE: THE SPIDER MONKEY

until landing on:

SLIDE: THE LION TAMER

Sq – linking music

RED: Great! Take it away Ginger!

GINGER pops her head back in and sees the screen.

GINGER: No, no no, sorry ladies and gentlemen – we don't do that… (to RED) You know very well Mufasah's dead.

RED: Well, if I didn't go and clean forget. Sorry sis.

He gives her the clicker. She tries to change the slide… it won't work.

He has stolen the batteries. He drops them on the floor.

RED: Oops now how did that happen (false smile) You'll be fine – just read mum's notes

GINGER: Fine. (she throws the clicker at him)

RED: Great.

GINGER: Good.

RED: Lovely.

GINGER: Fill for me will you? Just have to prepare. (she goes off)

RED: You do that.

GINGER: (off) I will.

RED: Fine.

GINGER: (off) Great,

RED: Exquisite.

GINGER: (off) Audience!!

RED: Oh, right. (sniggering, he knows he's put her in the shit) Ladies and gentlemen, have you ever come face to face with the king of the jungle? Well tonight prepare to be amazed by Ginger the Lion Tamer. Ooooooohhh!

He clowns around with getting the crowd to oooh and aaaah. GINGER surprises him by appearing onstage, dressed as a glamorous lion tamer, with whip and stool. She is owning it. She whips him off stage and cues music.

Sq – lion taming music

She does a couple of rounds of the stage with whip cracks, then uses the whip to get an audience member onstage. She dresses him as a lion, and presents him to the audience.

Music – Lion King

Music - Lion sleeps tonight

Gets him to kneel on the stool. She becomes increasingly feisty and inexplicably Spanish. Her tag line is “This is what we do now”

Gets him to roar on the crack of her whip. And gets a bit scared.

Magically gets a hoop from off stage. Rolls the hoop and catches it in her buttocks. That stung a bit.

Does the MGM pose with the “lion”. Then its time for the climax. She goes upstairs to the platform. Reaches through the curtains and pulls out a can of lighter fluid. Squirts fluid all over.

Constantly reminds the lion to look to the front.

Reaches back with the can of lighter fluid and exchanges it for a lighter. Tests it – it’s a large flame.

Realises it’s a bit dangerous, so reaches out again, and pulls out her hand and it’s got a huge oven mitt.

She makes her way dramatically down the stairs. Holds the hoop in front of the lion, then goes as if to light it over her head, reaches back and pulls out another hoop with fake flames.

He jumps through.

He’s OK!!!!

GINGER derobes the lion, gets him to take a bow.

She takes her own bow.

RED comes back on, seething because his plan to get her in the shit didn't work.

GINGER: Nailed it.

RED grabs the lion costume possessively, as she cleans up from the scene.

RED: This is mine.

GINGER: You stole that from Cirque de Soleil!

RED: It was a gift. From when I was in the Vegas show.

GINGER: Yeah. In the audience.

RED: They were very interested in my work. I got a call back. They always loved me in Canada. (he strokes the costume, carefully putting it away)

GINGER: Of course they did little bro. Now hand it over.

He gives the clicker.

(Uneasy truce – it won't take much for the duo to fall apart)

ACT THREE

GINGER: Now, next scene.

She clicks the clicker, revealing:

SLIDE: THE CARAVAN OF DOOM

Finishing each other's sentences (a hidden scene – meant to happen. – they exchange glances

GINGER: Right, I'll just go get the Spinning Sally from the van.

RED: Ah, yes, about that, sorry Ginger, but the darndest thing has happened…

GINGER: What's going on?

RED: Well, Ginger you know how much I like to be

GINGER: kissed.

RED: no

GINGER: tickled.

RED: NO,

GINGER: on top?

RED: surprised. ,.I like to be surprised

GINGER: Oh.. right surprised… yes

RED: I love being-

GINGER: BOO!

RED: yeah.. thanks.. well anyway, I was just up

GINGER: the coast

RED: No, up

GINGER: to no good

RED: No up

GINGER: sidaisys

RED: No stairs, I was upstairs

GINGER: Oh, right, sorry. upstairs

RED: Yeah, just upstairs in the theatre.. And I saw the cleaner.

GINGER: Who?

RED: You know, the guy with the enormous

GINGER: head

RED: No

GINGER: ears

RED: No

GINGER: Feet

RED: NO

GINGER: Spinal column

RED: NO

GINGER: I can keep going all night.

RED: ELBOWS…. The most enormous elbows. Extraordinary. And the man said, I hate to tell you this, you have a-

GINGER: -rash?

RED: No, no.. a

GINGER: -spergers?

RED: No a

GINGER: -frican heritage?

RED: No a

GINGER: tissue?

RED: No, a

GINGER: tissue?

RED & GINGER: We all fall down.

RED: No, no a problem,

GINGER: Oh no, a problem?

RED: Yeah, a problem..

GINGER: What problem?

RED: Well, see this is it, he was trying to tell me about the problem but you see I wasn't paying any-

GINGER: -taxes?

RED: no, I wasn't paying any-

GINGER: (knowingly) -child support.

RED: No I wasn't paying any-

GINGER: GST

RED: No attention! I wasn't paying any attention. Because this woman walked past with the most amazing pair of-

GINGER: Yeah… (laughter)

RED: You know what I mean… the most enormous pair of Labradors… I have ever seen.

GINGER: Right, Labradors.

RED: And suddenly these two Labradors suddenly jumped up and grabbed my b-

GINGER: Balls?

RED: No, my b

GINGER: Your big balls?

RED: No my b-

GINGER: Your big blue balls?

RED: No my bag.

GINGER (whisper) Oh, your ball bag.

RED: My bag.. And I chased them, all the way down

GINGER: The pub

RED: No down

GINGER: The sink

RED: No down

GINGER: Syndrome

RED: No stairs, downstairs, past the theatre, out to the …

GINGER: carpark..

RED: Yeah, that's right, the carpark. And when I got there, I saw what the old guy was talking about.

GINGER: Yeah?

RED: Yeah… well, what can I say?

GINGER: Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers?

RED: No,

GINGER: She sell sea shells by the sea shore?

RED: No but.

GINGER: Moses supposes his toeses are roses?

RED & GINGER: But Moses supposes erroneously..

RED: AAARCh look no, Ginger, what can I say, I've stuffed-

GINGER: -your turkey?

RED: No, I've stuffed-

GINGER: -your duck?

RED: No I've stuffed-

GINGER: Your chicken?

RED: No, I've stuffed-

GINGER: Your turducken!

RED: No, up, I've stuffed up.

GINGER: Oh.. so what have you stuffed up.

RED: Well this is the thing.. I was up-

GINGER: Stairs,

RED: With the guy with the enormous-

GINGER: Elbows

RED: And the woman with the enormous-

GINGER: Labradors

RED: And I ran down-

GINGER: Stairs

RED: To the -

GINGER: carpark,

RED: with the Labradors grabbing my-

GINGER Ball bag

RED: When I noticed our touring van was moving. And that's when I realised I'd left-

GINGER: The stove on

RED: No, I'd left-

GINGER: -your girlfriend – I never liked her

RED: No no. Really? No, I'd left

GINGER: -your heart to the sappers in Khe San.

RED: No, keys in the ignition. And well..

GINGER: Oh. My. God.

RED: Yep.

GINGER: So… you're saying the van.. has-

RED: Yep.

GINGER: Because you-

RED: Yep. Ginger, I'm so sorry I just…. (He is very upset

GINGER: Hey, hey hey…. Shh shhh.. Shooshies. Red, say no more. I hear what you're saying.

RED: You do?

GINGER: Of course, I understand totally. And it's ok. We'll work it out.

RED: Really?

GINGER: Of course. I'm your sister. Of course I understand.

RED: Really? And you're not mad?

GINGER: Of course not. Silly billy. You mean you interrupted the show just to tell me that?

RED: Well, I thought –

GINGER: It's fine. Now (fake scolding) we've got a show to get on with mister!

RED: But

GINGER: Look, we'll talk about it in the van on the drive home. Next act!

SQ – comedy sting.

RED: What is the next act?

GINGER: Silly Red, it's (she clicks the clicker)

SLIDE: THE NAKED FLAUTIST

GINGER: The Naked Flautist. No, sorry. That was Josiah's bit. May he rest in peace.

RED: Didn't he just move to the Gold Coast?

GINGER: Well, almost like death.

SLIDE: PIFFY's BELLS

GINGER: No, no... Oh, that's third-cousin Piffy – her cowbell routine was something else.

RED: Whatever happened to her?

GINGER: She's dead too.

RED: Oh, a dead ringer.

THE SWORD SWALLOWER

RED: Oooh that was Baby June's act

GINGER: She only did it the once.

RED: Sword was too long.

GINGER: She was too small.

She clicks again:

SLIDE: THE DANCE OF LOVE

SQ – linking music –

GINGER: Right I know this one.

RED: Are you sure?

She pushes him off stage.

GINGER puts on tails/ suit jacket and a hat. Cues music.

SQ – Dinner muzak

- Adds her moustache.
- Knock knock.
- Opens door.
- RED is dressed in a dress with a stole.
- Invites Red in and kisses his hand. Ginger takes Red's stole off and in the same movement puts it on herself.
- Oh, where is it? Red gigglingly points out that she's wearing it.
- Oh silly me! She puts the stole back on RED, then gets confused, kisses her hand and pushes him out the door.
- Happy with the night. Hang on.. oops
- Knock knock
- Ginger opens door. Red still there.
- Come in! Hand kiss. Takes off his stole and puts it on herself. Oops! Red takes off the stole and accidentally gets Ginger's jacket on him. At the same time Ginger gets the stole on her, and Red gets Ginger's hat on.
- They both notice that they are in different costumes, and take on those roles. Red kisses Ginger's hand and guides her out the door.
- Oops!
- Knock knock
- Ginger is at the door being the woman
- Red welcomes her in and kisses her hand.
- Takes her stole. She takes his hat. She kisses his hand and pushes him out the door.
- Oops
- Knock knock
- He is at door as woman. She welcomes him in.
- Takes her stole. At the same time, he takes her hat.
- Now they begin a game of stole/ hat swapping, each time they change gender, they jibber in the man/ woman voices they have created. It gets faster and faster until GINGER is thoroughly confused, and dizzy, lost in the game of swapping, forgets to take the hat, and keeps spinning around, muttering an doing the motions of the swap.
- RED is left with the stole and the hat. Confused, he leaves.
- GINGER is left on stage alone. She realises she is 'naked". Aarrh!

- RED knocks at the door – ‘scuse me ma’am is this yours? He hands her the stole. He lifts his hat. Happy to be of service ma’am.
- She takes the shawl gratefully. Then realises she is not in her house. Aaargh!
- RED opens the door – what are you doing in my house? Get out.
- GINGER leaves.
- Knock knock
- GINGER is at door, fingering the door frame.
- RED slams door
- Knock knock
- GINGER has become the Russian pie lady, holding a cream pie
- RED slams door, takes off jacket and hat and throws them away.
- Knock knock x 3
- GINGER comes round the side of the flat – didn’t you hear me?

RED: No, I’ve had it with you.

He pushes her off

GINGER comes back on

GINGER: Come on, it was going well.

RED pushes her off.

RED: I’m doing the scene without you.

GINGER comes back on.

GINGER: But you can’t do it by yourself!

RED pushes her off into the props. We hear bangs and crashes.

RED: I know other people apart from you!

He comes back on with PLASTIC WENDY. GINGER comes on – are you serious?

He gestures her off.

SQ – Time of my life

RED dances with Wendy.

GINGER sneaks in and unplugs Wendy. As RED begins the Swan Lake part of the dance, she starts to deflate, and dies.

GINGER physically gets RED off stage, by making Wendy come to life and attack him.

She fashions a sign saying “GINGER”, which she sticks over the screen, so it reads:

SLIDE: THE DANCE OF GINGER

She cues the sound.

SQ – She works hard for the money

Right. Two can play at that game. She takes a balloon. Fills it up – manipulates it. Eats it, and shits out a poodle She is taking the transgessive role.

RED: (entering, clapping sarcastically, cuts the music) Oh bravo, bravo.(he takes the poodle) She had that up her skirt the whole time, you know.

Let’s just get on with the show, some of us are professionals. Next scene!

SLIDE: THE RULES OF COMEDY

GINGER: You sure you want to do this one?

RED: Oh I’m sure.

GINGER: Ok then… take it away.

RED casually, like an actor from the Actor’s studio, leans on the stairs.

RED: It’s at this point in the show where we like to do what we call in the “industry” a “check in”.

GINGER tries to be casual, leaning on the door frame.

GINGER: A check in.

RED: Yes, a check in.

Possibly clowning around with check in – to annoy RED.

BEAT

RED: Right. You see people often ask us, don't they Ginger-

GINGER: Oh yes.

GINGER runs and tries to jump up on the platform and misses. She acts cool.

RED: (Annoyed at being interrupted) They ask us –

GINGER: OH yes, all the time.

She tries to jump up again. Misses and falls to the floor, tries to cover it up with a casual position. As RED says the next lines, she awkwardly clambers up the platform, grabbing onto him, arriving just as he says, the "rules if you will."

RED: All the time they ask us, how do you do it? How do you make audiences from all over the world laugh? Well tonight just for you ladies and gentlemen, we are prepared to reveal our secrets.

RED: Our comedy secrets. The rules if you will.

RED jumps down. GINGER tries to follow, over the next lines.

And if you follow these simple rules, anyone can be funny. Even you, sir, or you, madam, but perhaps not you... could perform what seems to be incredibly complex routines, the result of years and years of intense training.

And long long hours on the stage

… performing with the same family member. Doing the same routines. Over and over again. Until you think if I do that routine one more time, I will eat my own elbow, which is really quite hard, but then the landlord comes again knocking on the door (He knocks on the door, GINGER falls off the platform)

GINGER (Save the show) But be that as it may... comedy is all about the rules. And most basic rule in comedy is the rule of three

RED: The rule of three?

GINGER: The rule of three.

PAUSE

GINGER : Doesn't always work.

RED: Timing!

GINGER: (Peeved with him) Another key ingredient in physical comedy is the use of violence to provoke laughter.

She backs towards him and punches him (back towards audience and he naps).

GINGER: Now if we combine the two principles – the rule of three and violence.

RED: What?

She punches him three times.

He is a mess.

GINGER: Now it is important that the violence is not too realistic, otherwise we lose the comedy.

As she says "comedy" he grabs her by the throat.

RED: What was that Ginger?

He punches her, elbows her then punches her again.

RED: Dad said you can't muck around with stage combat.

He slams her into the platform.

RED: (whilst kicking her) You want there to be another accident huh? Is that what you want? It's not safe! You're making me do this!

He sobs

RED: (spitting on her) Dad never loved you.

See, not funny. (To GINGER) Not funny!

GINGER: (shaken) Too serious. (to RED) Too serious.

RED: Another way to enhance the comedy is to play with the location of the physical suffering. It could happen at the doctors'.

GINGER: Thanks doctor Brown.

RED: Remember 2 a day with food.

She opens the door into her face. As she returns, she goes to speak.

RED: Or, it could be at the dentist.

GINGER: (unwillingly) thanks dentist Brown.

RED: See you next week – 2.30! Ha ha.

GINGER laughs and slams her head on the door. She is a little more beat up. She goes to speak again, but RED gets there first.

RED: Or you could be buying doors in say, a door shop.

GINGER walks warily over to the door and opens it slowly. Success! She relaxes and then gets her thumb caught in the door and then pulls the door into her crotch when freeing her finger, then slams the door on her other finger. As she is leaning back in pain, the door knob goes up her bum. She is a mess. RED opens the door for her (she can't) and then slams the door in her face.

GINGER: (Revenge) A great way to provoke laughter is to place your physical comedy in a familiar situation, for example, the domestic environment.

RED irons with the phone tucked under his chin.

RED: Yeah Karen, I can get the boys.

He notices some stubborn pleats.

RED: Hang on Karen.

He puts the phone down, attends to the pleats. Picks up iron and holds it to his ear, ironing with the phone.

RED: So Karen… sorry Karen I can't hear you…

He realises the iron is stuck to his face.

HE SCREAMS.

Picks up phone.

RED: Sorry Karen I'll have to call you back.

He picks up the iron and speaks into it.

RED: Could I have an ambulance please?

Realises phone is in his hand. Realises face is burning.

HE SCREAMS.

This lazzi goes on for a while until GINGER takes the props away. Maybe she burns him again.

RED: Or in the work place.

GINGER: Hey Gary, can I borrow your stapler?

RED shakes his head in amusement, opens a mimed draw, pulls out a gun and shoots her.

SQ - Gun shot

As she gurgles his own blood and lies twitching in pain…he shoots her again, and again, and again.

RED: Buy your own stapler, Denise.

RED: Or in a romantic scenario.

SQ – romantic music

RED and GINGER run towards each other and hold hands and spin round and round. RED becomes nauseous and vomits on GINGER. She is so revolted she vomits on him. Then they vomit on each other. It becomes playful and romantic. She rubs it over her hair. They flick it over each other. He vomits down the back of her back. They hold hands and spray vomit on the floor. They draw a heart in the vomit. Exchange vomit and he places it near his heart. They walk off hand in hand.

Then RED runs back and does a vomit angel. She is not impressed and wants to cut the scene. He keeps going, making vomit snowmen, throwing at audience etc.

Eventually she comes out, cuts music.

GINGER: But of course, the simplest way of making comedy is the use of nudity.

RED: Are we doing this?

They strip til both are in their nude suits.

RED notices GINGER has his bits on. He tries to grab them back, she runs away around the drum kit. He tries to get her but is impeded by the kit.

This is it. This is war. The tables have turned, and now GINGER is transgressing, going off script in her sheer desire to annoy her brother.

She runs into the audience, dropping the penis into an audience member's lap. It becomes a game of piggy-in-the-middle.

She starts throwing props ineffectually at him through the open door – the rubber chicken, her hoop, the stole, Wendy.

He gets some more effective props to throws at her, ending in some juggling pins, and she is backed into a corner. She slams the door and he goes to go round the flat to through the last thing at her, and she shoves a cream pie in his face.

As he tries to recover, she thinks – that was awesome and goes to get more. Meanwhile he goes stage right to get some. She comes onto an empty stage with two pies and looks stage left, leaving herself open to a pie attack from RED (carrying two pies) from the other side. She hits him with one of hers on the side of the face and he then runs past her, slamming her own pie in her face and throwing his second one in her general direction.

He goes round the back, she fakes pain and he falls for it – she gets him with the one from under the platform. She then goes round the back, leaving him disgusted in centre stage – no I've had enough – it's not funny anymore! She gets him on either side of the face, and he's back in!

The audience are given three pies by RED, who has another one – he sets up the conspiracy, we'll get her! He tries to open the door quietly, and then she creeps round the other side, ambushing them, getting the audience to throw their pies at him.

At the end, both are covered in pies and exhausted.

SQ – denouement.

They stop, look at the audience and realise what they have done. THE SHOW MUST GO ON.

Grudgingly, they swap bits.

Re-united with their bits. A joyful scene.

They click slide together for final scene:

SLIDE: THE END

Sidekick

Sidekick (Megarrity/Vincent)

1 Everybody needs a buddy

Who's got a sense of how they tick

Everybody needs somebody

Who won't give them the flick

You're the bow to my strings

Back me up when I sing

And together we can make it though anything

Through thin and thick

With you I'll stick

2 Everyone needs a tune to hum

When they're feeling low

Everyone needs a chum

Who'll come when it's time to go go go

You're the rock to my pebble

You're the bass to my treble

When you bump into me

you accompany me

Through thin and thick

With you I'll stick

'Cause you're my side kick

BR my four strings sound so lonesome

When nobody plays with me

When somebody plays along

There's more harmony, you see

3 Sometimes I get to wondering

as the song's about to end

Are we each other's sidekicks

Or are we each other's friend?

When the odds are stacked up

You're my back up

You're a hoot, you're a gem you're a total crack-up

Coda Wrongly or rightly

In the lineup of likelies

You're the one I'd pick

To be my sidekick

Appendix 2 – Performance stills

Photographs of premiere season of The Furze Family Variety Hour

By Lukas Davidson 2014


FAMILY

Appendix 3 – marketing collateral from premiere season

Extract from 2015 Brisbane Festival programme

Extract from JWCOCA What's On Guide


BRISBANE FESTIVAL
THE FURZE FAMILY VARIETY HOUR
SEPT
TUE 2 – SUN 7
THEATRE COMEDY
TIME 8pm
DURATION 65 mins, no interval
VENUE Shopfront
TICKETS $27 – $22
unreserved cabaret
Presented by Judith Wright Centre and Brisbane Festival
Produced by deluxe Productions
Meet the Furze Family Variety Artistés! Well, meet Ginger and Red. The others left. Or died. Or became accountants. Nevertheless the show must go on!
Together, this brother-and-sister team pull out classic vaudeville routines, put on the old razzle-dazzle (and a lion costume they stole from Cirque de Soleil) and take the audience on a never-to-be-forgotten ride through their dysfunctional relationship.
Featuring Helen Cassidy and Leon Cain
Directed by Bridget Boyle
ONLY ONE THING IS CERTAIN:
THERE WILL BE PIES IN FACES.

Brisbane Festival and Judith Wright Centre present

THE FURZE FAMILY VARIETY HOUR

debase productions (AUS)

THEATRE **WORLD PREMIERE**

Meet the Furze Family Variety Artistes! Well, meet Ginger and Red (Leon Cain and Helen Cassidy). The others left. Or died. Or became accountants. Nevertheless the show must go on!

Together this brother-and-sister team pull out classic vaudeville routines, put on the old razzle-dazzle (and a lion costume they stole from Cirque du Soleil) and take the audience on a hilarious ride through their dysfunctional relationship. Only one thing is certain: there will be pies in faces.

Details
Tue 2–Sun 7 Sept, 8pm
–
Shopfront, Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts
–
60 minutes
–
Adult $27
Concession $22
(includes all fees and charges)

Bookings
brisbanefestival.com.au or Judith Wright Centre– (07) 3872 9000

Brisbane Festival and Judith Wright Centre pres

THE PAINTED LA

Plus One Records (AUS)
Leanne de Souza

MUSIC

The next generation of contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists take the first Australian black protest album and make it their own.

Vic Simms joins emerging singer-songwriter Luke Peacock, passionate performers The Medics and a range of guest artists for a special musical collaboration that includes a brand new version of the album and an accompanying documentary, as well as a gritty, powerful live music experience.

Appendix 5: Interview transcripts

Written interview with Liz Skitch

- *What are some of the strategies of physical comedy that you use in your work?/*
- *What are some strategies of physical comedy that you identify in the work of others?*

LS: I trained at Ecole Phiippe Gaulier and the time I spent at his school or working with his past students (who all have their own spin on things), has provided me with strategies to devise, perform and direct physical comedy. At the heart of his theatre training and indeed his starting point when training actors is 'Le Jeu' or 'The Joy'. The audience must be able to see that the actor is playing and loving being on stage but not for him or herself, for the audience. Philippe is most famous for his strict training regime for clowns. Whilst clowning is considered predominantly physical, there is a complex psychology behind it. These can are often articulated as clowning rules such as:

The clown is naïve.

The clown never wants to leave the stage.

It the clown does something that gets a laugh he/ she will try it again.

The clown is friends with the flop (when a joke flops) and the clown can play with the flop.

These rules expand when moving into duo or group work:

Two clowns on stage play major and minor, taking it in turns to win the love of the audience

The clown thinks his/ her friend is very clever and supports every attempt at humor, even when it has to be sold to the audiences like a 'dodgy used car.'

Philippe also drummed into me the importance of more general comic strategies such as:

Start small so you have somewhere to go.

Don't underline or overplay.

Never outstay your welcome on stage (leave them wanting more!)

And the importance of surprise.

Philippe also provided me with strategies for creating comic characters. Unlike clown, these start with physicality and the disguise, then the psychology comes

later. During the character unit, Philippe asks his students to turn up to class in disguise, 'We should not be able to recognize you, your voice, your body… your own mother must not even recognize you'. Students rummage through op shops to find the costuming for their character then one by one 'audition' for Philipp. If you have indeed transformed completely into another identity, then he begins to improvise with you on stage. Otherwise you must, 'leave the stage immediately!'… and back to the drawing board.

These days for me, mostly, the physicality of the character is my starting point. This might be inspired by someone I have seen or read about but when attempting to become this person, I start with physicality. How does this character hold themselves, how do they move, what are their rhythms, how does their face sit, what are their physical quirks? Then once I have established their physical vocabulary, I can add the other layers; costume, voice, attitude. Sometimes the other layers come first and then I force myself to dig deeper to find and establish the physicality… It is essential, without it, the character can easily become diluted or lose it's essence- especially when carrying out quick changes from one character to another.

- *How do you use these strategies to create complete works?*

My approach is different each time, depending on the style of the piece. When creating a clowning show, I always commence with training the troupe in quite a strict regime. This way, when improvisations begin, we don't stray from clowning into other styles like general theatre- sport- like- improvisations or character comedy.

Once the training is complete, then the theme is introduced which in the case of a clown show is always framed as 'The clowns are attempting to (insert idea here)'

For example, in the first ever clown show I performed in which was directed by Russell Dykstra, the clowns were attempting to stage Romeo and Juliet. The first clown show I created for debase productions was a clowning version of the Titanic. Then later we created the more politically charged 'The Clown from Snowy River' in which the clowns (Indigenous and non- Indigenous) were attempting to stage the history of Australia. In 'Hurry Up and Wait' the clowns are attempting to wait for something that may or may not every arrive (this one was inspired by Godot).

When I create character comedy pieces such as 'Frocking Fantastic' or bouffon show such as 'Spoilt', suitcases of costumes, wigs and shoes accompany me into the rehearsal room. These costumes aren't dress ups or over the top. They are things that everyday people wear. People that aren't me. Sometimes male, sometimes female. Sometimes fat, sometimes skinny, young, old.

- *How, in your view, does the gender of the performer impact on these strategies?*

Physical comedy is a very individual thing and sometimes things are funny for inexplicable reasons. But rather than simplifying these anomalies by boiling things down to gender, it is more related to the individual's identity, energy, attitude and physicality and one's gender is simply part of the mix. A performer can choose to utilize their femininity or masculinity for comic effect but this is just one of many cards that can be played.

- *Do you think that female physical comedians have to "work harder" to get laughs than their male counterparts?*
- *If so, why?*

I think this is an archaic notion. Female performers who think they have to work harder than men to get laughs are only holding themselves back. I've performed as a comedian in a wide variety of performance contexts- clown shows, street theatre, theatre, cabaret, burlesque and stand up.

In all environments I have found that being a woman works to my advantage, sometimes my female perspective and body doesn't come into play at all (and this in itself is powerful) and other times I have utilized it and milked it for all its worth (as in my naked accordion act).

Probably the most challenging of all performance environments was stand up in pubs and clubs when I was often the only female on the line up.

And when I started out I stupidly entertained the notion that it was tougher for women. But when I finally got my first killer five (minutes of material) together there was no need to use that as an excuse anymore. The reason I was not getting laughs had nothing to do with the fact I was the only one on the bill wearing a skirt but it had everything to do with the fact I was new and didn't know how to write a joke. My point is that the male comedians starting out like me had an equally hard time.

- *What, in your view, are some of the key issues that impact upon female physical comedians?*

If we were talking about female film and tv actors or female news readers… then I would highlight that it is harder for women to have careers than men because they have to look a certain way (flawless complexion, skinny, perfect teeth, well done hair) due to the pressures of the mass media and entertainment industry.

But thankfully in comedy, being different from the norm can be used to our advantage. The clown is the underdog and from this position we can better satirise, usurp and subvert.

Interview with Andrea Moor

BB: I wanted to ask you about your directing techniques. If you're able to talk about how you approach a work with actors, working in a physical mode. Let's break up the question, maybe talk about it from a performer's point of view, to maybe talk about physical techniques?

AM: Ok. I remember years ago when I was just one or two years out of NIDA, Richard Wherrett paid me a really good compliment, said that "I love the way you throw yourself wholeheartedly into the work", which is probably a problem in terms of film work! But I know myself as a performer, certainly for comedy, finding the physical side is the first thing I do.

BB: So it's your way into the character.

AM: Yes, I mean I always do an analysis process when I start a character, and I tend to use the Practical Aesthetics process, because it's just such a great way of breaking things down. But then once I start to get into the room, I get into the physicals on day one. The second I get up on the floor, I try to wear something that's going to be my costume, maybe shoes if I can and I get into the physical straight away. And that of course can change, but until I can get some sense of the physical life in a comedy, I kind of don't know where I'm going. If it's a more dramatic piece, where I might have a more internal approach. But a comic piece, I think, it's much more about finding the physical. That's not to say though that I can't also marry an internal approach as well, I might have very much decided on an action for the scene, I may have personalised that in some way from my life, I may have done all of that, and I'll find some physical approach. Now I learnt Laban work many, many years ago when I went to East 15 when I was living in London. And later I did it again at NIDA but in less detail, but I go back to that work all the time. So looking at efforts – am I quick or sustained, am I light or heavy – those kind of things I use a lot. Often unconsciously, but then I might look at a part and say, "well I'm going to be a slasher". I also find I get a lot of the physicality from the language. For example I did Pygmalion 3 years ago, and I had 2 or three tiny roles. And one of them was this maid. And the maid's function in the piece was to simply come on and deliver a message and then get off and go, but one likes to do a bit more than that! And Michael Gow was directing it, and the great thing about it was that Michael always gives you open slather. So I thought ok, I've only got – this is just being a complete show off!- I've only got from the wings, to where I go, introduce the person who's coming in and go, and I think I did that three times. So that's all I've got. So that means the first time I come on, I have to make an impact, so I think I decided she was Irish. And with the Irish came something, a physicality. And I remember not making any decision about that at all. And just the first day of rehearsal, just sort of throwing something out there, that was quite big and over the top, but Michael laughed, and that's always a good sign if Michael laughs, and I thought, well I've got

something here. And there was a kind of a quickness with my physicality which came with the delivery, and that was certainly a discovery. And more often than not the physical life is a discovery in the moment. So once I've got those shoes on, or I've got "does she wear a cape, or a shawl" or whatever – "does she wear gloves?", once I've got those little things, then stuff comes – "how can I use it?". I mean I love props, I just love them, how can I use – and someone like Michael can be very frustrating – because the last few shows with him were absolutely minimal, and there was nothing I could play with!

BB: I'm interested in props, because that's a classic physical comedy key – that human relationship with inanimate objects – that's really interesting.

AM: I will look at – what can I use. And there is a little bit of upstaging! You kind of go, ok I'm going to make an impact. And you hope that other actors go, ok – there's kind of a "topping", you know, how interesting can we be. We did Absurd Person Singular, and the role I had in that was such a fabulous role. There are three acts and she's just a little bit tiddly in the first act, quite sloshed in the second act, and absolutely pissed as a fart in the third act. And she was awfully English, and so I did a complete rip off of Penelope Keith, I sat down and watched hours and hours of her, and just stole, and tried to get the exact same mannerisms. And in that case, I thought how do I do this sort of tight-arsed, upper-class English woman who gets more and more pissed. So that provided a lovely little challenge, because she didn't have a physical fluidity, there was a kind of tightness. So that was fun to see. So... as an actor, I do approach things very physically, but I do take a lot from the text as well. They have to marry. And there's always keys in the text, of what the physicality might be, whether it's just one word, or one sound that keeps getting repeated, or whether they have a clipped manner. You can find that.

BB: There's a couple of points there that I'm interested in – you said that you jump in, you just threw something out there. I loved that note that you love props. And the other thing I love is this notion of having a game on stage, and topping each other, and working as an ensemble. I want to take you up on that last point if I may, and if you can have a think about how you think that gender affects that game of topping each other. Whether you've ever found yourself in a situation where you feel your gender as a woman has come into play in that game on stage, or if it hasn't.

AM: I always use my sexuality a lot in my work. And as a director that's what I respond to when I direct women. And I really don't like watching plays, often directed by men where I see that the actresses' sexuality has not been embraced and explored and I mean this in the most empowering way.

BB: Could you just unpack that for a minute? When you say "sexuality" you mean....

AM: Well there's enormous power in our sexuality.

BB: Do you mean everyone's?

AM: Yes, everyone's, but I'll just talk about women's for the moment. In a woman's sexuality, there is massive power. So in terms of comic stuff, there's wonderful comic energy in how the character perceives herself – so does she perceive herself as a Marilyn Monroe character when she's obviously way past that. Like my character in Absurd Person Singular, she was a very tight –arse thing who loosened up, so she was in her negligee by the last act, so it was quite a shock to the audience. And I feel very comfortable with that as an actor, so that's something that a director never has to get out of me, because I feel that I like to explore that I'm a woman.

BB: A heterosexual woman

AM: A heterosexual woman, but if I was in a scene where I was playing a lesbian, that would be the same case, it's just that clearly, I'm 53, I'm not some sex kitten, I'm not some sex symbol!

BB: I disagree with that entirely!

AM: But what I'm trying to say is that it's not about being sexy, it's about "well I'm a woman, and I have a sexuality". So therefore it's something that has to be used in my work.

BB: So I'll just clarify something, so when you say it's not about "being sexy", I think and correct me if I'm wrong, it's not about...

AM: It's not about objectifying myself. It's not about being something a man would say – "oh, that's sexy, that turns me on". It's about saying "I'm a woman and I am very powerful and what I have is a sexuality"

BB: And I have a sexual desire that I will follow?

AM: I have a sexual desire, but also I am fabricked - I have multi-layers to my fabric. And that is intellectual, and it is spiritual and it is physical and it is sexual and there's incredible power in each one of those fabrics.

BB: Ok, yeah

AM: And as an actor, I want to use every single part of my fabric to tell the story and to affect the other actor. And so one minute it's using the intellectual, and the next minute it's using the physical bit, and another it's using the sexual bit. Whatever, it's that it's all there. And you know when you see wonderful mature women performing, like Helen Mirren? She's so sexy! She's so fucking sexy! But

she's not saying, look at me, come fuck me! She's sensual and sexual and it's part of who she is, and nor do you think that she's playing it, it's part of who she is.

BB: And she's not denying that.

AM: No! And I think a lot of male directors don't know how to deal with that.

BB: Ok, this is interesting.

AM: And I see it in a lot of younger men directing in Sydney and Melbourne. With the young actresses, there's almost a de-sexualising. And it really concerns me. It's almost like..

BB: Is there a fear there?

AM: I don't know, maybe there is, but I wonder whether there's this sense of.. in order for a woman to appear strong she has to play the intellectual fabric, and not all fabrics. I don't know.

BB: This is really interesting. I want to come back to that point on directing, because that's where I want us to eventually finish. Can I just question you. You used a lovely metaphor – you said I am multiply fabricked – I have many layers that I can call on when I am performing, and we're talking specifically about physical comedy. Have you ever felt, or have you observed, do you think there are certain physical comic situations that have been difficult for you to perform because of you gender. Do you think there are some fabrics that you can't put on, or that you've observed, that haven't been a good fit – if we're going with the garment metaphor?

AM: The only thing I can say, is when I've got a director who for some sort of reason is putting up a barrier, because I don't feel as an actor... look as an actor we always want a challenge. I can think of one role in particular where it wasn't really happening for me, to where I wanted it to be in rehearsal, but literally as soon as I got the costume on, it all happened. It was a character that wasn't brilliantly written, but that did have a terrific life once it got on the stage and got the crazy make up. She was kind of a clown in a way.

BB: Needed an audience as a clown does.

AM: Yeah, needed an audience, and needed this other layer. So that was a situation, where once make up and costume and an audience were there. And it was a very out there costume, the costuming really did mean a lot to the character, then that one worked. But the only other time that I've felt that I haven't been able to really get to where I wanted to is where I'm working with a director who's prescriptive, and who basically says this is what I want, or who at any point says "Oh. Is that what you're going to do?" And you feel that there's not that environment to play and to make a fool of yourself. Because you've got to be able to trust, that I'm going to get up, and I'm going to have a go, and I could fall flat

on my face. And I work with directors who want to see the end result on day one and it's just the most stifling thing. And I've had that from men and women. To get back to that question – do I find my gender has affected.... hmm... because I find that it's liberating. What I'm able to do, as a woman, men can't do.

BB: What's the difference do you think? What kinds of physical comedy do you think that you can inhabit that a man couldn't?

AM: I don't know if it's that simple.

BB: Sure!

AM: I mean the last show I did, Design for Living, I played a man and I played a women, and they were both comic roles, and my modus operandi was to try to be a convincing man, not to be a woman dressed as a man, and it was complete with fat suit, and I had my haircut, a man's haircut, and found a physicality, and found an accent, and change things about myself. I mean that's the thing that I love is – nothing to do with gender – is to be able to completely change myself. So vocall and physically. So the other character I played was a woman. And he was English and she was American and she was kind a Marilyn Monroe type, mutton dressed up as lamb, and a wig, so massively different physical characteristics. And she had big tits and she was all that, and she was kind of "I'm really stupid, but I don't care", so it was kind of embracing all of that, and that wasn't really on the page, I embellished all of that. So what I did with that role – cos there was Fez who was also playing in drag as a maid, and he was very very funny. So, she was very sexual. But at the same time there was a comment there, because she was clearly a woman of mature years who was acting like she wasn't. And I felt very comfortable playing that. Someone said that my character reminded them of that Texan wife of the doctor who owns most of the surgeries. Hmm I don't know if I can answer the question. I know where you're coming from. I saw a clown show the other day. A bunch of women who are working on clowns, and it might be good for you to see their work, and some of the stuff they were doing was really really interesting, and some of it wasn't, and it made me think about gender, and I just think it's about (pause)... if you're a good performer and if you're willing to go the whole hog, then gender just doesn't play a role. I mean I have never felt any difficulty in my career as an actor, because of my gender. The only thing I might have felt might be, just stuff you always get with other actors, you might be working with a particularly famous actor, who doesn't show you too much attention because you're not a young hot thing!

BB: Which could be in any profession, at any time!

AM: Exactly! I remember working with one particularly famous actor, on the first day on the floor I made him laugh and I could just see him go ok, she's ok, she can act, and winning him over with my ability. But, you know, on the floor, up doing it, I've never felt that my gender has...

BB: ...precluded you from certain modes of comic expression, you don't think it has? Becuase I'm really interested in what you say about feeling comfortable in your sexuality and owning it, feeling that it was something that you could use, or not use as you chose. Because another physical comedy performer said that for her, the main block, or any barrier to "throwing yourself in", or "going the whole hog" was what she termed the "struggle with beauty". She said that a lot of male teachers don't understand why women sometimes don't want to throw themselves in, because they're struggling with that idea of beauty, not just on the stage, but every day in life, being judged for what you look like. And feeling a struggle to maintain a certain kind of image.

AM: But this is where comedy liberates you from all that, I think, because, clearly, here I was, in Design for Living, I was two sizes bigger than I ideally would like to have been when I'm wearing a close fitting long gorgeous evening gown, but I used that, and went ok, well I'm the blonde bombshell, and I'm gonna use it for all it's worth, and so kind of accepting it and it can work really well for the character, and it did work really well for the character, cos there's Bryan Proberts who's tall and skinny, and there's me all pfff, you know, which was great ...

BB: But you weren't in that character, I'm going to assume, I didn't see it, but from the way you described it, you didn't say, isn't funny that I don't look like this, you were saying "I look fantastic"

AM: And I think I'm 22, when clearly I'm not – the character was all girly, when clearly she's not, so then there's no need to amplify that.

BB: Yeah, you didn't need to underline.

AM: And then the other thing was to be willing to be as ugly as sin – my man was absolutely..

BB: I saw pictures and I couldn't recognise you!

AM: He was sort of Sir Les Paterson! And to me that's just great fun, to be able to go either way.

BB: Is it a confidence thing then? Because the way that you're describing your work and your process, there's a great joy, I can see in your face when you talk about it, and a confidence...

AM: I feel I am absolutely in my element when I'm in a rehearsal room, and when I'm on stage. I do feel very confident. I've done 5o shows or something, and it's almost like, it's where no one can get me! You know, I grew up in a family of older brothers and you know in life people can get you, but when I'm doing my thing, you can't get me, it's my thing, and I do know what I'm doing. It's when I'm working with a director who doesn't trust me that I find it hard. And that's where I'll go into that needy child, or I'll just hate it! But when you're working with a good director who respects you, who can say that was great but that was crap. I love that – that's fine! I respect you, but it's not working at this point. So I

do feel confident about myself. It's very different on film. But on stage I feel it's my milieu, it's an exciting place to be, in that rehearsal room. I have a real hunger for everything that's going to help me tell the story.

BB: We'll just finish I guess with directing and facilitating physically great female comic performance. And wondering if you can, coming back to that idea of acknowledging and celebrating women's sexuality which was the first point you hit as key way to facilitate female performance on stage. Wondering if you could talk about that a bit more from the point of view of the director.

AM: Well I'll talk about Venus in Fur, was to give Libby absolute confidence, was to give her my absolute confidence and trust, that's the first job, because here you've got an actor who you know, is going to have to go to the moon and back, and the first thing she needed is to know that she had a director who completely and utterly believed in her, and was going to be there at every point to support her in being the best she possibly could. So that was my first job.

BB: Could you even break that down further, even into some mini techniques?

AM: Well first of all, it's about allowing. So the rehearsal starts, even if she were to offer something I didn't like, allowing it, and building on it, and growing on it, rather that ever going, oh no no, that's not working. And they had to put up with a few things from me, like I wasn't entirely sure of the sound, a few accent things, and so Libby have kind of gone down one path that I wanted her to go down, then I kind of went "oh, I'd rather go down this path", which was quite a big change. Changing accent meant changing the whole physicality, but she was great with that so, it was about setting up a working method where all offers were accepted and encouraged and then supportively guided in another direction maybe. Where once we reached one point, there was never a sense that we've arrived, it was more – ok we've got to that point, but now we've got to go here, to here, to here. Setting up that notion that once you've run the distance, there's another marathon to run. The amount of energy that that show needed was extraordinary. I did do a lot of Laban stuff – talking about it and suggesting that. She already had a facility with that. Sometimes it's encouraging actors to act, too, cos actors often get scared of being truthful. So it was going let's just go to town, let's just take this idea, this one physical idea, let's just take it as far as we possibly can. And if it's too far, ok, we'll pull it back. Really encouraging that, and of course, because she'd already done all the work, of course it was truthful. And we found we could be as big, we could go further, we could be more physical, and of course that first character, that New York character is a slash, she's chaotic, she's insane. We would say, she's like a chimpanzee in a china shop, and then she stops. Looking at very simple physical things like that. So she had the accent that really helps, the Queens accent is quite nasal, one very loud noise and the picture is very loud and then we go to the Donaive (sp?), So we did a lot of work on simply moving her physical pitch. And that was a really big thing, and if she started Donaive on the wrong tone, she would be out for the

whole play, so she had to get right down, talking from your cunt, and if she was down there, she was great, and she'd find it.

BB: I think that's a reclaim moment there. Talking about owning your sexuality!

AM: And of course that effect that had on the male character was... wow. Because he'd written these two very sexual characters, one who's all out there. And one who the man has to come to. She's a magnet. All she has to do is stand there beautifully poised with this gorgeous voice. And we used thing like that. The voice is just like honey, and you could see him go "oh my god" and just be completely magnetised, drawn to her. So the writer gives you that incredible gift. So my job as a director was to encourage the extremes. Sometimes we went too far, but very rarely. What might have felt too far to Libby – and this is often the case – with an actor –what might feel extreme, it's absolutely spot on! I don't like working in the middle zone, I like working at either ends of the spectrum. So it was a very physical approach, and everything was in the script. The first character talked at him, the second character affected him. She was kind of in her own world, the second character it was very much about what response she was getting from him.

BB: To just finish up, you spoke about allowing, about saying yes, about confidence building. Can we bring it back to that idea of, I'm really interested in celebrating the sexuality, and if you can, if you can say whether as a director – do you do overtly, or are there techniques you can use to get your female actors to own it, as it were?

AM: I think it comes back to power. As an actor I am interested in the choices that my character makes, and I think it's exactly the same for me as a director, that why is that woman making that choice – has the writer written this woman in such a way... even in Shakespeare, I'm always as a director looking for the most empowered choice that a woman can make. And I don't know whether that's because I'm a woman, I think it probably is. I have just seen so many productions where I've just cringed at what the director, the male director has had the actresses do. And I've gone, this is ridiculous, yes I'm a feminist, but I'm not a ball breaking feminist, I live in a marriage with a man, but I go, the choices the director has encouraged this actor to make, is just totally disempowering for this character, and it's not speaking to me as a modern woman. So that I feel very strongly about, so I'm interested in empowering choices, even when the woman is playing the victim. There's still a really complex story to be told about the choices they're making. And I get very frustrated with simplistic choices onstage. Because I mean look at us for god's sake. We're mothers, we're academics, we're artists, we're very very complex human beings. And I go to the theatre and I see another woman onstage, a character onstage who doesn't reflect any of the complexity that I have and I go this is absurd! Especially as such a large percentage of the audience are women! Mostly my age! So I feel very strongly that would be an aesthetic that I would bring to the work as a director, I also am fascinated by the dynamic between men and women. I am absolutely fascinated by it, having been in plenty of relationships myself, a failed marriage and all the

rest. And living with a man for 15 years, I'm fascinated by male/ female dynamics. I want to see the full complexity of that. PAUSE Did I answer your question?!?

BB: Yes! I'm getting a sense of the way you run your rehearsal room which is exactly what I wanted, to help me work out what's the best way for that performer/ director dynamic to work, to shape the most successful and you used the word empowered-

AM: And I also think the best results always come from the actor, not from me telling them what to do. I mean I love actors! I'm an actor myself, so I know that if I have an idea, all I can do is talk around the idea, and let the actor find the way to manifest that idea, and that will be a much more interesting choice than anything I can make anyone do. Hopefully any good director would do that. And I'm trying to become a good director. You've got to set up an environment of play and just see what happens. And just very gently encourage and coax and massage it into where the whole thing

Interview with Leon Cain

BB: Leon as a performer of comedy, when you're starting to create a physical comedy character, what are some the steps that you go through ... if you have any conscious steps that you take.

LC: Hmmm.. yeah I don't know, because usually I don't know what I think about really, I don't think too much about it. I mean most things would come naturally, like a character that's instinctually in me. Like I've got awkward, geeky personas that I've worked with a couple of times. They were probably formed from being 10 years old and trying to be funny. Or through high school.

BB: So from your own past, sort of layering certain characteristics ...

LC: So it's easy to go into those.

BB: You used the word awkward there. If I could just pick up on that. 'Cos I've been thinking about what it is that physical comedians actually do... their strategies and techniques that we as an audience respond to. And the idea of being able to balance awkwardness with ... with grace, almost so that there's a presentation of awkwardness but kind of a technical mastery at the same time. Would you agree with that?

LC: Yeah. Well it's that kind of, if you're worried that they're going to fall over or stab themselves and they pull something off, that's what catches you by surprise. And it's the realness...

BB: Ok, so if you can sell it to us.

LC: Yep

BB: But at the same time we need to know that you're in control, of the gag?

LC: At least in the moment ... I don't know, because even in real life, if someone REALLY fell and then REALLY recovered themself, REALLY hit a bowl of something, REALLY caught a spoon or something, and it was just a freak of a moment, you'd be in shock, but you'd probably laugh.

BB: Would you laugh as much though, than if you saw it framed, and knew that they had done that deliberately?

LC: What, if you knew it was set up - would you laugh as much?

BB: I see what you're saying... are we laughing at the actual phenomenon: "Oh my god, they're going to shit themselves... no they got out of it", or are we laughing at the skill of the performer to make that happen? Discuss.

LC: Mmmmm I think you could do all different degrees of it. Let me think. I guess sometimes you laugh because you know what they're going to do, you know the trick, you know the gag...

BB: The expected laugh.

LC: Yeah, and you go "Oh good, they did what I knew was going to happen." But then also, with some of that sort physical comedy, you're trying to catch them off guard, and not so much prep it. So then they're surprised when they laugh.

BB: I think this is it. There's a combination of the expected and ... say there's a cream pie. We know it's going to go into a face at some stage. And there's a sense of satisfaction when it does. But it's *how* it actually happens... how they make it happen [that gets the laugh].

LC: So you still need something that they *don't* know. I know Jimmy Carr wrote a comedy book and he said that the basic formula of all jokes is that you set something up which makes the audience have an assumption. And the tag line is breaking that assumption. That's it.

BB: Yes! In terms of the way you use your body, are there any techniques that you deliberately use, or if you think about it now, looking back over your work over the years, can you say, yes, that's a common factor, that's something I always do. Take your time.

LC: Hmmmm.... I guess I've never really watched myself back..

BB: Stuff that you feel in your body?

LC: Yeah, there's certain rhythms that you do, like if I'm teaching kids, there's certain things that I know will always get a laugh... because they're more likely to laugh at like "Oh he moves his hips funny".. or "Oh, he wiggles his arms funny" which if I did it to a group of adults, I don't think they would find it funny.. they would say "Well.. you're moving weirdly.. ."

BB: So it's specific to an audience..

LC: Hmmm.

BB: I mention it because when I was talking to Louise [the other actor in the creative development]I noticed that occasionally she would let the weight go to her pelvis. And when you were working often you moved with your chest out. Were you aware of that?

LC: No, no.

BB: No? And a real mixture of light movement with that awkwardness that we were talking about before. So that, say for example in the microphone routine, the mixture of – we knew that the cord was going to get tangled – but occasionally in the tangle, the shapes that the body made, were actually quite beautiful, so it was that combination of two different [qualities] – awkwardness, and smoothness at the same time. .. Can you think of any ways that you move, when you go "oh, yes, I'm doing that again"... for example, your geeky ten-year-old... how does he move?

LC: Yes, I guess the awkward nerdy character is one that's always in the background whenever I'm doing comedy. That absolute uncertainty of themself - that complete lack of self esteem, judging yourself. Like, "should I put my hand in my pocket.. oh no, that won't look good" [Leon moves tentatively, each action is deliberate].

BB: Oh, that's interesting, because some of the routines that we did, there was quite a certainty of movement about you.

LC: Yes, cos I was just also thinking, I also do that kind of sleazeball character, like in the microphone routine, who's just trying to fake it.

BB: Yeah, fake it till you make it.

LC: But underneath, there's still that awkward stuff.

BB: So there's a bravado on top of it, but a stupidity underneath it.

LC: Yep.

BB: Nice. So the things that were coming up earlier... the audience has got to believe it, and setting up an assumption. Really, that's about acting technique, and a sense of belief and truth in the acting situation, and if that's there, then we're prepared to go with you. We have to believe that this [the situation] really matters, that you really want to impress the girl...

LC: And I think a lot of it is to do with when you know how to make something clear to an audience in a simple way. If you got a group of people, a class to repeat a routine, they might completely skip really crucial signposts that you need. Even though you [the performer] is not saying "Oh look I'm putting it here, so that later"... you do it in a way so that you don't seem like you're selling it to them, but the audience pick up on it, you know when you set up those sorts of things.

BB: So clarity is important, and so is constructing it in a logical sort of way,... is that what we're saying?

LC: And you know as a performer, if an audience has read it. You know yourself, if you've set it up properly, then you've got that It's that ability of knowing you've set it up and knowing the audience is with you and knowing it's going to work. Whereas some people would not know, or have any concept of..."well I don't see why that part's important" or "I don't know how to put that across without being too obvious about it".

BB: Ok, and say for example, you were going to teach that, how would you teach it, that kind of construction of a gag? I know it's tricky because what I'm asking you to do is kind of analyse a really instinctual thing.

LC: I guess it is, firstly to go back to, for you as the personal character in the moment of doing it, why it's important to you. And then I think it's just something you learn on the job, once you do that, focus on that a while, then you start picking up on what the audience is reading, and then you'll start to know-

BB: How do you know the audience is reading it, I wonder?

LC: When they get the thing that you're setting up.

BB: Down the track..

LC: Yeah, the pay off.

BB: Ok, so what you're saying is it's in the doing that you learn it. And I know it's tricky, because what we're trying to do is give a language to something which is quite tacit. You just do it. Timing. How do you explain timing? It's a tricky thing.

LC: Umm... use seconds. Or minutes, depending on the gag.

BB: Thank you Leon. Thank you for that insight.

LC: How would you explain timing?

BB: I'll finish this piece of muffin and I'll tell you.

PAUSE

LC: The recording doesn't see the timing.

BB: I have to say, just get in front of an audience, and you read them. Oh, that's good [the MUFFIN]

BB: I have to try and explain what a physical joke is, what it looks like. Like the Golden Age dudes, Chaplin, Keaton, and Harold Lloyd – those kind of dudes – people are just kind of obsessive about them and there's so much "Keaton does this, then Keaton does this" and it's very dry, just describing these kind of gags. And I guess for me I'm more interesting in what the body is doing. You know when somebody walks onstage and it's just funny. The way that they hold their body, it's just funny. What is it about someone that's just funny? For me it's where the weight is carried, sometimes. Can you think of times when you have seen physical performances and it's just the physicality that's been funny? And what is it about that that's worked for you?

LC: Well I think, I was just thinking of Frank Woodley, and maybe how Carl Baron might walk on and do a stand up. Or Sean MaCallef. And then I'm thinking, is it because you've seen them before? I mean, it gets funnier. But the first time, was it funny? With Woodley you'd probably find him funny the first time.

BB: How does he move?

LC: It's that kind of... every step's uncertain thing, and he's lanky, rubbery.

BB: He's quite clownlike in that way. Cos every step is like "will gravity work? Will gravity work? Will gravity work?" Every step is a test.

LC: Yeah. There's heaps going on with his eyes and his mouth and his neck.

BB: Yeah? Could you unpack those for us Leon?

LC: His neck's almost birdlike sometimes. He's like a puppet or something. And just how doubtful and terrified his eyes would be. That's what's really funny.

BB: Cos he's truly bewildered by the world, isn't he? He's a true clown in that way. McCallef is in the eyes, isn't he? He's got a stillness to him.

LC: Yeah, cos he's just a funny man, and an odd character of a human, because he could be really well presented and dashing in a way, you know if he was a lawyer and a barrister, he's got that attitude of like he's a kid as well. He'd walk on and try to look normal but then there's those big eyes or something stupid. Which really shouldn't be funny but it is.

BB: Why do you say it shouldn't be funny?

LC: Well if he's just going with his eyes and does that big eye thing...

BB: Leon just made his eyes go big and lifted his eyebrows. And it was very funny.

LC: But it's a dickhead move. If it was some douchebag doing it going "this is funny" you'd be like, whatever. But he's like Sean McCallef.

BB: He's a funny guy!

LC: What about Bean. Rowan Atkinson.

BB: He is a truly rubber-faced performer, because he can make his face incredibly handsome and dashing.

LC: What, really?

BB: Yeah, absolutely.

LC: Handsome?

BB: Yeah.

LC: Oh. Ok.

BB: Leon laughed disbelievingly. Yeah!

LC: Bridget's odd taste may interfere with her studies. No, really, Mr Bean is a sexy man.

BB: Not Mr Bean. Blackadder!

LC: Oh.. yeah yeah.

BB: This is the point, when he's playing .. not the first iteration of Blackadder, but the subsequent ones, when he has some intelligence, he's actually incredibly attractive. And I think that shows the certainty in his eyes, he becomes more the dashing clown, rather than the bumbling clown which he is as Mr Bean. When he is incredibly unattractive. But now we're getting into ideas of attractiveness. Hmm. It's interesting because I was reading the Tina Fey memoir, which is so so

so good. Bossypants. She was saying... because obviously what I'm focussing on is gender, and whether gender makes a difference to how people perform physical comedy, she was saying that after a certain age, women comedy writers are described as crazy... and she was just wondering whether.. cos we were talking about attraction... the transcript of this interview is going to be really interesting! I'll edit out all the bullshit [I didn't]. And she was saying maybe women are described as crazy because they keep talking after no-one wants to sleep with them anymore. That leads me to the idea of gender. Do you think there's a difference in the way that males and females perform physical comedy?

LC: Hmmm.....Not really. I guess there's just different material and subject matter that they'd use.

BB: Do you think?

LC: Yep, otherwise it could be exactly the same.

BB: What difference to you see in the subject matters?

LC: Well, I just.. I dunno... I just though of Ab FAb as one kind of example. I dunno, it'd just be jokes that ... women talk about this... men talk about that..

BB: ABFAB is a good example of physical comedy. I mean it's got a really strong intellectual wit going through it, but also when those performers enter the screen, there's something about the way they hold their body which is hilarious.

LC: Mainly being drunk is the physical gag.

BB: Jennifer Saunders has kind of a marionette floppiness, contrasted to Patsy, who is so stiff. Almost commedia =-like characters, slightly exaggerated.

LC: Who else is there?

BB: Well, Lucille Ball.

LC: Oh yeah.

BB: There's a classic Lucille Ball sketch, where she's decided that she's going to be a be a ballet dancer. And she comes out in a ballet costume, she's got that combination of gawkiness, trying to pull her ballet dress down. So in that regard, she's using those exact same strategies of uncertainty.

LC: Yeah. You know she was paid a hundred thousand dollars an episode?

BB: In those days..

LC: And in those days.. that's like getting paid...ten million dollars...

BB: That's like Charlie Sheen.

LC: She would gamble, betting a lot of money too... she was cool.

BB: It's interesting, when we were just chatting, we just came up with male examples. And we have only found those couple of female examples. And I guess part of my research is trying to find out why that is. When we've thrown around those couple of female examples, I'm trying to find if there is a difference. And I don't know that there is. Those particular techniques that are use. Can you think of differences? Why is it harder for women to do physical comedy?

LC: Is it something to do with the set up? I mean what was Lucille Ball's character Lucy.. she wasn't married was she?

BB: She was. She was a slapstick star in early talkies.. and got given her own tv show I Love Lucy, with Desi Arnaz, who was her husband in real life and who was her husband in the show and then they broke up and it was just the Lucille Ball show. So you were saying, you think it might be something to do with the set up?

LC: I wondered if it was something to do with. If women in a different role, maybe.... Does it make a difference, the role she's set up in?

BB: Something about social expectations of roles? That right from the start impact upon it...

LC: Cos I remember having the conversations of why aren't there as many female stand-ups? And people were saying they think it's because men can laugh at men, and women can laugh at men, but then men find it hard.. it's a power issue almost, to laugh at women. And then women aren't very supporting of women either, so they also struggle with it.

BB: There's definitely something going on. And that question has been analysed over and over. And that stuff on stand up definitely impacts upon physical comedy, because there's the same kind of thing going on.. kind of in that there's such disparity in the numbers game. Shall we just pause it..

[Recording paused and resumed]

LC: And that is the answer. That's why comedy exists.

[Laughter]

BB: Glad I got ethical clearance for that. You were saying it's something to do with the set up. I think the reason why people make comedy has got something to do with it. Germaine Greer apparently said that men develop a facility with comedy, whether it be physical comedy or verbal wit, because it's a way to kind of survive in the group, if they don't have physical strength.

LC: I always had both. It's just purely a choice, to be funny as well as being huge.

BB: Instead of beating the shit out of people. Which was the other way you could have gone. So well done to you for choosing the less violent option. But women, traditionally, don't need to have that combative group mentality. Whereas with a group of women, there'll be a lot of laughter, but it won't be a kind of one-up –

manship process of I've got the floor, I'm the funny one, look at moi. And I think there's something in that, possibly.

LC: Yeah. Well in terms of just physical comedy, and carrying your body a certain way, well that's always going to link back to a person from society that it's based on, like that's a loser, that's the outcast etc. I guess there's something more serious about an outcast female.

BB: Oh! Ok. That's interesting.

LC: Like it's easier to laugh at a trodden on male.

BB: This is great.

LC: But if you see trodden on female with a child, that's not so funny.

BB: Yes, that's absolutely right. That's my thesis right there. Ok, the tramp character, the Woodley, Mr Beanish character.

LC: Like when it's male, and drunk.. that's ok.. but if it's a female..

BB: We think it might be wrong. So the essence of a slapstick gag, where someone gets hurt. Say slipping on a banana skin. If a female does that.

LC: A pregnant woman.

BB: It always comes back to the reproductive organs! She's got a child, she's pregnant! But what if she's not pregnant, what if she doesn't have a child?

LC: Hilarious. But if she lands on one of her boobies.

BB: Is that bad?

LC: See that's not funny.

BB: But then a male getting kicked in the crotch is funny.

LC: That's fine.

BB: Why is that fine?

LC: It's not fine, it hurts like hell.

BB: You're absolutely right. Although there has been some reclaiming of that.. what's that movie.. Molly Shannon.. where she punches and she's like "My titties".

LC: Yeah.

BB: See it's funny.

LC: Yeah.

BB: But if a man punched a woman in the boobs.

LC: Well that's just wrong.

BB: See what we're saying here, perhaps it is funny, but perhaps it isn't politically correct to laugh at a woman hurting themselves.

LC: But it's kind of like the anti-joke. Like a woman saying "Oh my titties" is the anti-joke of a man getting kicked in the balls. Is it?

BB: I think it's exactly the same joke, really. I think it's interesting that that look of a man bending over with that look and we've seen that so many times, but I can only think of that one example "My titties".

LC: What are some other funny women from ye olden days.

BB: Well, there were lots of funny women from that era. But those names have been forgotten. Lucille Ball is the exception.

LC: You showed me that duo.

BB: Isabelle Coca and Syd Ceasar. Gracie Allen and George Burns. And see Lucille Ball was an executive producer, so she had creative control, like the Chaplins and the Keatons, who were the writers and the directors, the auteurs... and Jerry Lewis.

LC: Just like Adam Sandler today.

BB: Ben Stiller perhaps.

INTERVIEW ENDS ABRUPTLY... why? Who can say?

Interview with Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw of Split Britches

BB: Let's talk about comedy generally. It seems that it is harder for women to get laughs than men. Why do you think this is?

LW: Yeah, cos a lot of humour is put-down humour. And women don't do that. But that doesn't mean they aren't funny. But that doesn't really answer your question, which is: "why do we work so hard?" Why does it seem so much easier for men?

BB: Yes. I'm thinking about ideas of timing, and how timing is so integral in comedy. Because of the way the female body is viewed, anyway at a base level, are we working to get over that, and is that impeding our timing? I don't know.

LW: That's a really good question. I'm not sure about that. I also think that men – this is from our experience with working with the Bloolips. They knew, they knew what was funny, they knew and understood and they were willing to ascribe to the formula: Badada badada badada BOOM.

PS: The light has to be bright.

LW: Yeah, the light has to be bright. Badada badada badada BOOM. And we were not interested in the formula. And we wanted to say, without even being conscious of it, we were saying, well we don't know what's funny til we get it into our bodies, and then sort of see. I mean maybe there's some of that, we're just not as interested in the conscious formula. I don't know.

PS: It's the same as theatre. The "formula" of theatre – we don't use. But with the Bloolips, Bette would come out in a dress, and the audience would immediately... HAH AH HA

BB: And why is that? I'm interested in that too, the idea of the drag...

LW: And that's definitely about prerogative. Alissa Solomon writes about this, in *Drag Act* – I think that's the name of her book. She says, that a man in a dress is funny but a woman in a dress is not. Because, [in the former case you] put down the minority.

BB: It's an extension of... the you know... "these 3 Italians walk into a bar"... it's a minority joke.

LW: Yeah, ethnic jokes...

PS: Wearing a suit, I have to work ten times as hard... [to get laughs?]

BB: Why is that?

PS: It's got easier, since time has passed and we've developed audiences. But it was never funny. When I came out as Stanley Kowalski, there was not a pin dropped in the audience. But Bette [from the Bloolips] would come out ..

BB: ... in a frock..

PS: ... in a frock and it was hysterical. And that's just the formula.

BB: Is there something there? In the formula? That we don't want to work to a formula?

LW: You might, since you're at the beginning of your research... you might look at neuroscience just a little bit. Cos I was reading some experiments done in neuroscience done around stress, and the fact that we women are marked by stress in a different way than men are. So if our stress hormones go into play, because of the oestrogen in our system, things are more extreme. Now I don't know the science around it but it might be worth looking into, neuroscience and gender. Now I'm not an essentialist, I mean, you're not born female and [therefore] act in a certain way, but I think hormones are massive.

PS: Whoever has them.

LW: I mean you can tell that when you see people who have transitioned from being women to men. Their personality changes.

PS: Totally.

BB: Yeah...hormones...

PS: Are a drug.

LW: That's right.

BB: Yeah... they impact on the way you are, as a person. It's interesting because there's a whole lot of different questions that are here, and I have to narrow it down. I think I'm narrowing it down to the actual performance. Because you could get into – what does a woman find funny, what does a man find funny, what does a woman who's becoming a man find funny, you know... So I'm really interested – and that's why I'm talking to you guys – in performers... how they actually do it, the experience of getting out there on the stage, and making people laugh, and the hard work. Because, you know, when it's singing, in comedy, when it's working, it's a fabulous feeling. It's a light feeling, but sometimes... I mean... you know there's been some studies done... you know that thing of... a man walks down a street and slips over, and it's funny, and a woman does it and we go... ooh are you ok? Can we help you, are you hurt? And people talking about ideas of status. You know, we laugh more at the big "drop". If really, if you believe... that [for women] the status is less, then the drop is less, then the funny isn't there. I don't know.

LW: I don't know, it makes me think of... there's this YouTube thing of a mother getting out of a car with a cake – have you seen it?

BB: No.

LW: Because it is THE funniest thing I've ever seen, and that is not about status. It's more about investment. Because there's this mother getting out of the car and you can just tell that she's invested everything in the world in that cake. And she gets up and she trips and falls in the ditch and it is just so funny. I just heave when I see it. And that wasn't about status, it was a matter of investment.

BB: That's a classic slapstick joke. Yeah, and we laugh more when the stakes are higher.

PS: And also when there's a surprise. When we studied... comics that were on live television – Sid Caesar and Imogene Coca. And they were really funny because they were live. Nobody edited it, polished it up. It was just the mistakes. Mistakes are really funny, that's why YouTube is so successful, because it's the mistakes. Someone's at a family party, and someone falls into the swimming pool. It's funny. So if you can do that on the stage. But the gender thing... this show doesn't do it, but we often build up gender {?} so when we change it, it's funny. Switch it around.

BB: Yeah... so it's the humour of the switch... changing your expectations. I set it up, I twist it.

PS: Well it's almost the magic act. Gender is a magic act. To me. And drag is magic. So to me, it's like a magic act, so somebody's out there and it's like... oh is that a man or a woman? It's compelling. Or... is that really how a girl would act? Why is she killing him? We don't talk about it that much, how to make anything funny. At this point, we just sort of figure it out.

LW: We do... look at people like Sid Ceasar and Imogene Coca, we really studied them, I mean we steal the structure of their acts, the timing. And what was great about them was that they were equal. So they constantly play the role of the husband and wife. But somehow, she was never the victim.

PS: No, never.

LW: Mostly he was the victim.

PS: Or they both were.

LW: Or they both were. Or they were the victim of absurd circumstances.

PS: Walking into a bar, and she's seated next to the band, next to the drummer. Nearly the whole act, the whole bit is about being next to a band. It's funny because everyone recognises it.

BB: That sounds great. It doesn't sound like Lucille Ball – much as I love Lucille Ball – she was always the putz.

LW: The fall guy.

BB: She always had to be rescued.

LW: No, well Imogene Coca was never rescued.

PS: No, never. He was rescued.

LW: Well, I don't know if anyone was rescued. That's a good term.

PS: They were on good drugs too. He was on really.. {?} cocaine.

LW: And when you think about the politics of the 50s I mean there was no real politics, it just worked. What worked for them.

BB: I love that. It was just that.. if this is funny. We're gonna do it.

LW: Yeah. We based a lot of our humour on them. Another group Nicholls and May was another one that we studied. That's from the 60s. That's a little bit different. But still there was no... status between them.

PS: Except for the jobs they both had... she was usually a secretary..

LW: Right.

PS: But even, that last bit we did today [a pie in the face routine]. We love doing that. "That's not funny... this is funny" because it's from vaudeville. We saw Sammy Davis Jr. and somebody else, a girl doing it. Because that was always the biggest laugh you get in the show, a pie in the face. It's the surprise when suddenly I just go WAP [and put the pie in Lois' face]. It wasn't perfect today, but it was ok because [to Lois] I didn't know where you were coming from. It's so much work to get the timing right. Once, when we did it I did not get the timing right. It was a horrible feeling. Once, I just missed her face. It's not easy to make things look wrong. Over and over.

BB: Yeah, to make it repeatably ridiculous.

PS: Like today, when people were asking... was that really meant to be in when you were asking if she was ok? Well it wasn't – I was just trying to get her to do her monologue, but she wouldn't stop talking to the audience... but then finally, she worked into the "That's not funny" bit. Even when we do it over and over we manage to figure out how to make it seem like it's an accident.

LW: I think the idea of looking at gender and comedy. You're going to have to look at oppression. Any oppressed class is gonna find... it's about prerogative and it's about privilege.

BB: I agree.

LW: The privileged class can laugh.

BB: We [privileged classes] put on a dress... isn't it funny... big boobies... isn't it funny.

LW: Whereas an underprivileged class... I mean that's why feminists were noted to not have humour because we were fucked off and mad and angry. I'm sure

there's loads of really good writing on this, I know you don't really want... to... you're going have to do some reading.

BB: I'm gonna have to.

[Laughter]

BB: I've been diving into bloody Kristeva... I mean loving it... the idea of... abjection...

LW: Abjection... yeah...

BB: And loving it...and...

PS: And Judith Butler.

BB: Butler, yeah. And there's a lot of stuff that's going to be interesting. But I can't wait to get into the room though. Because I'm directing a male and a female comic and we're just gonna play. And the end result will hopefully be a new vaudeville piece.

LW: Well we tried to make this piece, where we looked at what happened: how to make sure that the female, or the feminine, remains centre stage when you have the masculine and feminine onstage as a comedy duo, and we worked on this one particular piece and it was a disaster. And the thing was we used Paris music hall as a kind of trope for it. Because they were like Madonna, Paris music hall singers were like Madonna, they were the star, they were the director, they were the writer...

PS: {name of French music hall singer – couldn't catch it}

LW: So the whole quest was: How do we manage to keep the female centre stage?

BB: This is what I'm trying to do!

LW: Yeah! And it's really hard. Because... for loads of reasons. It was really hard for us. Only thing I can say is don't fall in love with the male performer! That's all I can say because that undermines the whole premise!

BB: Absolutely! Oh my god, if any other hardships that you can remember that bubble up PLEASE hit me with them. Actually Liz Skitch, she's my main collaborator... she's my best friend as well as my comic co-performer... she's actually pulled out of the process because she said: "You're setting me up to fail."

LW: I felt set up to fail.

BB: She thought – are we just gonna go down the old road of going: boys are funnier than girls. I was like NO – I actually want to prove the opposite. But she said... no... I don't think I can do this.

PS: It's a trusting thing cos when we did Bloolips, the boys used to say to me: "Why can't you just... do this... it'll be really funny." And I would go "No – I don't wanna do that. It's NOT funny." And it was really a lot of aggravation. They were like, "I

don't understand how women can't be funny. THIS is how you're funny, you have to do this. You have to take the fall..." And I said I don't agree with you. It's a real set up if you've got yourself a woman and a man.

LW: It is a set up. You're set up to fail. And no matter what we did, I mean I was even standing on top of a platform with a 20 foot dress, with our history behind us, of how we make comedy, and we're working with {Name of music hall performer}, Maurice Chevalier{?}, working some of these old tropes out, and you have to be really careful. And part of the care is in the process.

BB: Because if I'm going in and worrying about those things, I'm nervous that as you say that I'll be privileging one kind of comic narrative.

LW: You know, that could you be your research, setting up a series of exercises, or rehearsal techniques, that privilege the feminine. They might fail. But that could be your practice-based research. To see and to document what works and what doesn't. So you think... ok... what can we do... we're working on... you go in and you look at say...

BB: Vaudeville routines?

LW: Yeah, ok, so you look at some classic vaudeville routines, and you think, how can we twist that to privilege the female and you go in and you try it and if you fail that's part of your research. And you look at why did that fail, and you investigate that failure.

PS: It's also very hard to make work when you're talking about it all the time. Like in ... work with drag queens, they always get... stereotypically, they always get the last word. No matter what I did, to top me, they always did something with the last word, or an exit or something. They just always got the last word.

LW: But you might just set up improvisations and film it and watch that interaction – use that as your evidence: this is what happens, the guy always tries to get the last word or whatever. Tops it.

BB: How can we subvert that?

LW: Well, seeing it, first of all, and then having your actors look at that and saying: How can we change this?

PS: You're going to have to have a willing man to work with. Who's willing to sacrifice some of his instincts – to survive onstage.

BB: Some of his ego?

PS: Because the woman is always the one who has trouble surviving, especially { } Wicked Scorpio {?}. He was also on drugs. So he always has to top everybody... It was those sort of jokes, always about topping. Higher heels, louder numbers, whatever.

BB: I don't know if you guys are into this stuff but... one of my idols is Jennifer Saunders.

LW: You look a little like her.

BB: Bless you!

LW: I thought of that earlier.

PS: She's extraordinary.

BB: She's amazing. That fact that – what's she's created with Absolutely Fabulous – that massive show – all women. With everyone playing their part... from the straight woman - from Saffy character... just beautifully done ... and noone's the fall guy because they're all in it together.

PS: Even the children.

BB: Oh yeah.

LW: She takes herself... this is the other thing... it's about taking yourself seriously. See as women, we need to take ourselves seriously. Because nobody else does. So then when you do comedy, you need to not take yourself seriously. And that's the problem. When I talk about the oppressed – the oppressed need to be taken seriously, and in order to be successful [in comedy] you have to NOT take yourself seriously.

BB: Therein lies the tension. And she's brave. And you guys are brave.

PS: She doesn't hold back. I mean, she says the most ridiculous things.

BB: And I love what she does with her body.

PS: And she exposes herself.

BB: Oh yeah.

PS: In such a wild way.

BB: In her stage show...

PS: I saw her stage show.

BB: Oh you did? Was it the French and Saunders – the live one.

PS: Yeah, a few years back.

BB: And when she does the Madonna pisstake? I just love her. She's an inspiration.

PS: Another really funny person is Lily Tomlin, and the way – do you know Lily Tomlin?

BB: Yes. I haven't seen a lot of her work.

PS: First time I saw her was when she was younger, and it was in a college just down the road from me... and I sneaked into watch... and she just lay down and did the whole show from underneath a stool. That kind of bravery...is exceptional.

LW: I think one of the things – this isn't to do with your research – I'm just thinking about it, and the way we work. One of the ways to make good strong comedy is to imitate good strong comedians. You know, to find what works, find the timing, find the physicality – find the concepts that they're working with make it work for you. And again this might be for your research... you might just set up some imitations - what happens when you imitate... You know George Burns and Gracie Allen? There's another comedy duet that we look at. And the thing with Gracie was that, she was not a victim... but he was the dominant, he was the alpha...

PS: Straight man.

LW: He was the alpha and she was the straight man, actually. But she was so dumb, that she took the stage. She's the one who took stage. I don't know what I mean by that.

BB: As exemplars... to copy?

PS: Because anyone who's that dumb.

BB: Has to be really fucking smart.

PS: If you do comedy, you're very smart.

BB: It is and it's just...we struggle... Liz and I and we have another colleague, Rob, the three of us have a theatre company, and we create comedy, that's what we do. We feel a little bit marginalised, it's like: "You do the funnies . Off you go, you do the funnies." But I say NO – have you ever tried to make an audience laugh – it's the HARDEST thing in the world that you can do.

PS: You can do the pie in the face thing if you like. That always works. Fart jokes...

LW: That moment, we've done it lots of times, like we did it at a really big benefit where there were like 300 people. And I thought the roof was going to come off the house. And that moment...

PS: The timing.

LW: Yeah – that is what it's about.

BB: It's a wonderful feeling. I don't know if you guys feel this, but I sometimes think, when it's working, I don't hear the laughter, I hear the silence.

LW: Yes.

BB: Because you're going – ahh oooh, no that shouldn't have been quiet, I should have gotten a laugh there. When they laugh, you go great, I've got to get onto the next one.

PS: That moment [the pie in the face], we could really enjoy it. It was really loud, they were all eating. It was dinner theatre kind of thing. And we've done that routine a couple of times when people were eating – we've done it for years. And people just spit out their food. When we do it right.

BB: It's that kind of primal response.

PS: Cos they don't have to worry if it's politically correct. Actually if you're getting into the male female thing – it's actually me getting over on her. It's funny. Cos she's telling me what's funny – the stuff she's doing to me, but I turn it all around and say "that's what's funny."

LW: I theoretically, from a feminist point of view, it should be reversed. But it's just the way it works for us.

BB: But because – we were talking about status – about sharing the punchlines – is that what it is? We were talking about Sid Ceasar and Imogene Coca, that's what they did, they shared the punchlines.

LW: Absolutely.

BB: And if you can do that – which you guys do.

LW: Yes, we do – that's a really good way to look at it.

BB: And in all good duos, there's one-upmanship: "I'll get you this time. Well I'll get you next time. Well I'm going to leave the stage. Well I'm going to sing a torch song. Well I'm gonna translate for you." It's awesome. Do you know, I thought you were going to take it all off. Do you do that? Do you go the strip?

LW: I do, Peggy doesn't. I used to do a thing where I did a reverse strip, where I came out naked and dressed to the stripping music. That was my claim to fame. And that's mainly what I do, I don't do it the other way around. In fact, we stripped when we did that bit again [pie in the face], the first time it was a jacket and we took the whole jacket off.

PS: And I had superman pants on.

LW: Oh yeah! And I pulled your pants down.

PS: And I had superman undies.

BB: I mention it because that's another little formula too, the nude formula. Sorry to talk about my own work... but just to give a context to what I'm talking about. Quite a few years ago, Liz and I – we have a comic duo called the Gooney Girls, we did a show. It was basically a new vaudeville show, basically just an opportunity for us to put together bits. The premise was we were two old cabaret stars who started performing together again – you know the old "let's get the band back together again". They got a message from God – it was all bullshit but we went back in time and we went too far back in time and went back to the womb. And so we were there in the womb, and the big decision was –

to nude or not to nude? And the director we were working with at the time, who was a male, was looking at it and we decided to go nude suits. So actually this is what started me on this research. We were in the nude suits and we decided that Liz had on a little muff and I had a little willy. And I tell you what – in that show we had played 10 different characters, we sang, we danced, we did the funny walks, but after the show, do you know what everyone was obsessed with?

PS: You had a willy.

BB: Yep. The willy. And it turned out - Liz said to me "Oh – you're a boy." And then at one point she took the willy off me and put it on her said: "No, I'm a boy. No secrets now." And so we finished the show. And everyone was just obsessed with the willy: "Can I see it?" And the director was like – "Why is it? Is it the dangle that's funny?" Is it the physiognomy of the thing that's funny? Do we need to put dangly boobs on you?

PS: No matter what you do, the penis, that's what they remember.

BB: And this is what started the whole thing. Years later I've come back to it, thinking: It's gotta be about more than that. Can we take the penis out of the equation?

LW: That could be the opening for your dissertation.

PS: We do a scene in one of our shows, *Less than Comfort* {?}, a musical, and I was packing. I unzipped my pants and what I pulled out was a whole fruit bowl, with grapes. And that was really funny. People really like that. And then another cabaret I did where I had to do a whole nightclub thing around tables. The table was right up to my crotch, and I had a remote car in my pants, and I opened my pants and a remote car drove out onto the table. People love crotch stuff. Crotch stuff is just it man.

BB: But is it the penis? Is that what they're laughing at?

LW: It is the penis. They wouldn't laugh at the cunt.

BB: But why is the cunt not funny?

PS: It's because of the power thing.

LW: That's a good title for your thesis: Why is the cunt not funny?

BB: "Putting the cunt back in funny." And there's a lot of stuff there, like we were saying, Kristeva, it's cunt fear. Almost cunt loathing. But it's 2012. Haven't we gotten over that by now?

LW: We can't even say the word "vagina" in the Wisconsin State Senate.

PS: They kicked her out of the senate.

LW: They kicked her out for saying "You can't own my vagina." You know they were talking about choice and so on. And they kicked her out for saying "vagina" – I mean it's a medical term!

BB: Wow. Well we are 2012... but maybe.... I'm just.. I'm just so sure that we CAN make the cunt funny. There are some funny women out there.

PS: Yeah. There's a great group called the Stunning.. no the Cunning Stunts. They were great.

LW: They were surreal. They took lots of risks. They didn't care whether they were funny or not, cos they were surreal. And it worked.

PS: They did this beautiful song: "Nothing could be finer than to be in my vagina in the mooooorning."

LW: la la la and a lady of Minora when it's waaarrming.

BB: Did Puppetry of the Penis tour America?

PS: No... I didn't see them.

BB: Hmmm it's almost like... a woman bears her vagina, and it's all very serious. Like in performance art, if a woman sticks a paintbrush up her vagina and paints with it, it's very serious. Like when Carolee Schneemann pulling something out....

LW: Yeah.

BB: We don't laugh. But when men get their dicks out, we have a giggle.

LW: Well, they are pretty funny.

BB: They're funny. Yeah.

LW: I mean, they are kind of weird. Cunts aren't weird.. .well they are but they don't have the dangle.

PS: I think it is the dangle. Well beside everything else.

LW: Well I think you could do some interesting practice-led research...

BB: Yeah.. well.. as you said.. setting up some experiments.

LW: Filming them.

BB: Yeah.. I almost just want to – I've got two very fine physical comedians. Just setting up the routines and saying – can you share the punchlines.

PS: Probably not for another 400 years.

LW: Well - that's your research. Can you work with these two fine specimens, and can you change the dynamic. And if so, what does that mean?

PS: Well.. if it's a giving guy.

LW: It’s great though.

BB: THANK YOU SO MUCH!

LW: You are so welcome.

Interview with Louise Brehmer

BB: Louise Brehmer, hello.

LB: Hello!

BB: I wanted to ask you about your process as a performer generally, and then talk more specifically about some of the things we've been doing here today. As a comic performer, and this is probably a tricky question, how do you think about your body when you're performing in a comic routine. Are there any specific strategies that you feel are winners, that you come back to in terms of your body when you're performing in comedy. And if you haven't thought about that, you can say, " I haven't thought about that!" Or if you can think of specific examples of comic routines that you might have done, and the way that you moved your body in those.

LB: Well I guess one approach is going with, I guess, stereotypes and caricatures of stuff and then moulding the body in different ways as to how that person might have come into being.

BB: Exaggeration perhaps?

LB: Yeah. I guess playing around with and altering [wanky arts voice] my leading centre. [laughter]

BB: Could you unpack that notion of the leading centre for me ploise?

LB: Well I think human movement in general is very interesting on a very small scale and also on a very large scale. Well I mean, we're strange looking beings! Let me unpack that! But, and this is something I do when I work with students, is just look at the way people move when they're just walking. I mean people are really fascinating when they don't know they're being watched. When people are not aware of having an audience, not just in a performing context. Say if I'm just sitting outside, waiting to meet somebody or something... just looking at the way that humans behave, when they're lost in their own little world, just all those tiny little things, from how they might walk... I guess what I'm trying to get back to is the leading centre thing, if they are chest forward, if they lead with the hips, if they lead from the gut, if they're feet first or leaning with the nose... I see those all as keys into a particular character. So if we're looking at an inside-out approach to character, I think observation is a really good tool.

BB: Observation, fantastic. So we've talked a bit about observation and exaggeration. When you're performing in comic routines, do you think that your physicality takes primacy, perhaps more so than in other types of performing? You can say no if that's what you think!

LB: I think so. I think that that is a fair comment because ... I guess there's something about trying not to edit any ideas, and allowing a kind of creative flow to happen,

and trusting that something's going to happen. I think there's a danger of locking things down too early in a process, or trying to analyse something too much as opposed to just trying stuff out, because it's that thing of.. you might have to mine for a little while before you get to the gold nugget. And I think if you're trying to get to the end point too early on, there's all these missed opportunities that I might not have anticipated when I first started out. And I think that's become evident in some of the stuff that we've been doing this week. Something to just get the ball rolling, and then it's "oh, this idea, this idea" which maybe comes about from my improvisation background, you know just coming up with stuff on the spot, throwing stuff out, bringing it back.

BB: It's tricky isn't it, because the kind of comedy I've been looking at this week, which is less cerebral and not about wordplay and more about the shapes that bodies make on stage. Obviously there is a sort of comedy which is very cerebral, very much about cleverness. You made an interesting comment before, where you said I don't think I can be as funny when I'm self conscious. And I thought that was interesting in light of what you said about not blocking yourself. Can you think of some things that do block you when you're creating comedy. One of them you said was feeling self conscious.

LB: It's purely my own insecurities about my own body shape. I don't mind appearing ugly, you know, wearing weird make up or wearing a bizarre costume, but my insecurity comes from what I see when I look in a mirror and anything that's going to highlight something that I just naturally feel insecure about as a woman. I just close up. I don't know why, I wish there was a part of myself that could just say "who cares if you've got a big bum, who cares if you've got a tummy?" or whatever. But I guess I hate it that... when you pulled this out [holds up a green lycra unitard], I just went [strangled sound of pure pain], even though the comedic side of my brain went, that's gold, that's just pure gold. Hilarious. Me wearing a unitard, that's just funny in itself. I think that's a block that I have. And I suspect that women probably face that more than male physical comedians. Not to say that that guys aren't worried about their appearance. I think that for me there's just a whole lot of issues that go with that.

BB: Because I think this is a really interesting issue and I think it's close to the heart of where I'm digging with my own research. That idea of perceived "imperfections" and I 'm going to put inverted commas around them, because you and I both know intellectually that the idea of an imperfect body is ludicrous. We know that up here [in the head] but it's different to knowing it inside [in the gut].

LB: And what's strange is I can look at an "imperfect body" onstage and I don't see any of that stuff in anyone else and yet it's the first thing I think of for myself. And I don't want to be, you know "classically beautiful", it's just an actual conscious hurdle that I have to get over if I was in that costume that exposes that vulnerable part of myself, which I should probably tap into because there's a lot of comedy in vulnerability.

BB: Do you think that, you mentioned when you watch something on stage, that you're not running those filters at all, would you say that applied to both genders.

LB: Yeah, I think I'm more interested in what they're actually doing, or how I'm responding to whatever it is they're creating , their faces. I'm not one to sit there and pick apart peoples bodies and say "oh gee, haven't they got this and that."

BB: But yet you as a creator... sometimes a block... That's really interesting. As a performer, I've felt that myself, and I know exactly what you mean. Ok so, you feel that's possibly a gender-related block. Is that in the creation of the performance, or the performance or both.

LB: Probably both. It would be exacerbated by an audience, because then there's me going "oh there's people going look at that, look at that". I REALLY wish I didn't feel that way.

BB: It's interesting because historically the male physical comedian or clown has a less than classical male shape, and yet can be cast as the romantic lead. I'm thinking Simon Pegg in *Run Fat Boy Run*, and we are meant to engage and believe in him as a romantic hero, and we do. Do you think that's less likely to happen with a female clown, or a female physical comedian?

LB: Absolutely, I think it goes across the board for women in the public light generally. I mean you've just got to look at the evening news. I mean you can have a male anchor, and it doesn't matter what he looks like but the women all have to be immaculate and polished and beautiful. And it's almost like their journalistic skills are secondary.

BB: So really there's a huge lot of baggage for us to get over before we even get to the point where we're making people laugh.

LB: Absolutely. If anybody has an answer to it... And I so admire women who go screw it I look like this and I'm just gonna get up. I mean I look at what Liz does in SkitchTease and I think far out you must have a lot of courage to just get up, in the nude and play with your accordion. I think it would take a huge leap of faith to be that brave. And yet in I'm brave in other aspects of performance

BB: And I think that many people would say that that's a signature part of your skill as a performer, your bravery, particularly your emotional bravery. Ok, can I get back to ideas of strategies. We talked about observation as a strategy, I guess if I'm going to extrapolate from that, observation means close-to-life. So if you're observing characteristics that happen in real life I guess when you're performing you're going to take on aspects that are close to life.

LB: Well it's a starting point, a blueprint, so I might make one part bigger and one part smaller. And observing not just real life but characters on film, or tv, not that I'm trying to copy other people but...

BB: No I know exactly what you mean. You used the word before – stereotype. That's about being familiar with stereotype and I guess archetype and I think you're right and from my research that I've done so far, the great comedians play with those archetypes, because they're sort of gut familiar to us. And them if you're able to play with them, to deviate or exaggerate for comic effect. Hmmm any other strategies that you use that you can think of. I'm thinking (about myself sorry, just while you're thinking) I tend to find that when I come onstage [in a comic/ clown role] my body centre drops and adopt this slightly pelvis forward position. I know it makes me look kind of gormless. Do you have that kind of default body position? Can I say what I've noticed? You're kind of stiff in your arms. Have you noticed it?

LB: [Laughs] No!

BB: Remember the other day I was saying relax your arms, relax your arms. You kind of go quite rigid and swivelling from the top.

LB: It's good to know.

BB: It's certainly funny. It's your eisteddfod girl clown.

LB: Is it with particular characters or is it across the board?

BB: No, not with all characters. I think when you're playing a low status clown, that's when you go to it. And it's lovely. It's just something I've observed.

LB: [getting up] is there something I could try?

BB: Yes! Thank you so much this is great.

LB: [on stage] I guess the most regular comic persona that I step into is my clown doctor character, Dr Wobble, cos it's something that I don all the time.

BB: Tell us about Dr Wobble.

LB: [acting out and wobbling her torso. It's beautiful, fluid movement and very funny. Very light] Dr Wobble can't really stand still. And she's not quite sure what to do with her body.

BB: Look at her, she's never still, never rigid.

LB: No, so when she's walking from room to room.. she's like [walking around, never still, pointing at imaginary patients]. It's like she wants to be cool but she just isn't.

BB: She's actually doing that hunched pose that I was talking about before.

LB: Except when she's trying really hard, then her arms get stiff and she's [strikes a stiff armed pose, similar to the one explored previously]

BB: Yeah there it is!

LB: Yeah! And her torso becomes quite stiff Not that I'm becoming self-conscious about it... Cos normally she's like this..[the fluid state] she's a bit of a dag.. and trying really hard.. that's kind of where this not really co-ordinated stuff comes from. Cos when I'm doing routines... she really wants to be a rap star. If she wasn't a doctor she would be a rap star. So she's all like [does a daggy try hard rap pose] "word. Word to your mother." [beat boxes]

BB: That's so good!

LB: You know, something that's just come to me is.. growing up, I've used comedy as a defence mechanism, always tried to endear myself to people. Cos I never felt like one of the pretty popular girls. So it was always "what've I got cos I don't have that." What have I got to use to get friends and to get by in life and that kind of thing. Yeah. I often feel that I'm like the least coolest person around. But I'm ok with that it's easier and it's more comfortable to be the daggy one!

Interview with Lucy Hopkins

BB: This is an interview with the lovely Lucy Hopkins. So Lucy, I'm really interested in firstly, how physical comedians can define what they do. It's difficult because I'm asking people to define what they kind of do innately. What sort of strategies, techniques, stuff.. for want of a better word. When you're performing are there conscious strategies or things that come to mind that you think , this is the way I use my body when I'm working in a comic mode.

LH: Good question, well then. I think, it's something about letting everything that happens inside, all the things that you feel... it's like following physical impulses, because your body gives loads of stuff away, if you don't block it. That's it really, it's about removing the blocks to your body exposing you as you are. And that's very funny.

BB: Just generally.

LH: That's just really funny to watch.

(laughter)

BB: Interview closed.

LH: Yeah, I think that's a really big part of it. For me it's like the pleasure of exposing the idiots that people are and so much of that is about social conditioning.

BB: Ahh ok, so you're working towards getting to a place beyond social conditioning maybe?

LH: Ummm no because it exists on the stage. I don't know how much of it's a work on me. Well yeah, loads of it's a work on me. I had a really good teacher who always said aim to be a really good performer. And I've found along the way loads of things about myself. But that isn't the aim. The aim is to be a great performer. If you aim to work on yourself, it never ends, you can go and disappear into your own arse, very fast. But if your end point is to be on the stage, this gives a very clear framework, and also you can push yourself further than you would because you can't be precious. It's like "I know it hurts, get over it, they bought a ticket". You know you can be much more practical, you can go much harder and further with yourself. Whereas when it's on you, it's too easy to lie in a puddle of your own gloom. It's difficult to have a reason to pull yourself out in a way. So, I wouldn't say the aim is so much about freeing yourself from social conditioning, although that does happen to a certain extent, that's like a by-product.

BB: I guess I didn't mean yourself in everyday life, maybe more when you're on stage, performing.

LH: But there is no social conditioning on the stage because the stage is such an artificial environment.

BB: Yeah, true.

LH: For me, it's always about recognising that, cos that's funny in itself. The idea of putting yourself on the stage...

BB: And we're sitting here watching you... and that's all the way through your show.

LH: Yeah, that's the whole basis of the show. Cos it was too funny. When I realised, the whole idea of putting together a solo show, I was like that's ridiculous.

BB: YES all the way through, you pull the rug out from underneath the concept of the one-woman show and say "I'm taking the piss" well that's what I got anyway!

LH: But it's still a show!

BB: It's a wonderful show! Absolutely! Ok so what were we saying.. we were working towards listening to your impulses and letting the impulses take over?

LH: Umm, letting the impulses direct your physicality. So for example if something happens.. a really classic example is something in clown work is called feeling the flop. Basically, you try and be funny and nobody laughs.

BB: And then, here's your friend Mr Flop comes along

LH: He's not, fuck that, people told me that, but it's painful, a bastard I don't want the flop

BB: Oh, it's awful

LH: But... when it comes.. cos when people say it's your friend, I'm not sure if it's super helpful in a way, cos the thing that I've found, if you try to tell a joke and it fails, the main important thing is to stay with the audience.

BB: Aha.

LH: They have to trust you. You have to trust that you're laughing at the same thing. If you don't recognise that your joke was shit you'll lose them.

BB: Because you're being dishonest.

LH: Yeah. So tell a joke, do a joke, whatever. They don't laugh. Then just feel how bad that is to be on the stage, having made a tit of yourself. And show it physically, however you wanna do that. And then, they come back, because you're on the same level again. Because if they go ohhh shit and you go ohhh shit... We're together again.

BB: (Has mouth full of fancy biscuit.) mmmmmm

LH: So it's about exposing when that happens to the body and you feel that thing, just let it be visible in a way. I do wanna clarify that though cos it is important though, for me personally, that the work is physical. You're not really working with your emotions, you're not saying "Oh well it made me feel like... it made me feel threatened". No. It's just the physical (does a physical expression of the flop)

Errgh. That's like the classic feeling of the pie in the face. It's that sort of immediacy, it's that sort of physical reaction, it's not the deep psycho.

BB: And this is..I think.. but tell me what you think, being a physical comedian is actually about being a really good actor... it's not about working up the feeling... not it's not about that. It's more "I know how to move my body to show you..." Or would you disagree with that, you need to feel the real feeling?

LH: Oh no..Not at all. I don't know if you need to be a good actor I think it's about exposing humanity. And then people connect to the humanity. Cos if you tell a joke, and it's not necessarily physical, then people laugh at the joke, and they laugh at the charm of the person telling the joke or whatever, and there's always this physical thing, because we're really sensitive. We read each other's bodies all the time, even if we don't acknowledge it. We see everything.

BB: That's why email communication is so hard, because we don't see the body.

LH: Yeah, you have to get good at words. And audiences are just so so sensitive. You can't get away with anything. And I would argue, neither should you try! Try and be really honest and then everyone's like "we had a real exchange"! It's like "Yeah!" Yeah and it feels great for everybody kind of thing. We were really there in the room altogether. And, yeah, one of us was doing a show! Overtly! For me it's important not to ask people to suspend their disbelief.

BB: Yep. I'm definitely doing a show for you. You're definitely sitting there watching me.

LH: And I definitely love it. And I'm definitely super happy to be here doing the show.

BB: Are there ever times when.. What if I'm not feeling it? (stupid actor voice with random US accent) "I'm just not feeling it". You know those times when I don't feel happy to be there? Do you just have to go with those impulses?

LH: The good thing with this show now is that it's written. So it does work. I have had some shows, because this was the first time I had such a long run, so I've learnt that – and been faced with exactly that like, what happens if I'm not in the mood? And what I've found was, I am always in the mood if I'm happy, if I'm well. So it's like, chill out and enjoy your life. Like, what's your problem, really. Cos if I'm holding onto a problem I can't do it. A lot of problems, you can pause them. Like I must do that, or I must respond to that.. it's like.. pause. Now, for two hours before the show, none of that comes in. Just do whatever I need to do, to get from this daily body energy, in two hours I need to be on performance level energy. So just get there, however you need. So I do a physical warm up, I go and warm up my voice, put on make up, all of that, like puts me up slowly. But a lot of it's about. ... well the first week in Melbourne was a bit rough. I had a great opening and then...it was just a difficult week. For lots of reasons, I was just trying to compute what it meant to be in a comedy festival. Cos I always bill as theatre, cos it's always kind of a nice laugh to get when people are surprised that it's funny.

BB: Yeah! And I was completely surprised, cos I didn't know anything about the show, I just saw the image.

LH: Oh, that's the best. The people who have enjoyed the show the most are the people who have really not known what to expect. And in the marketing I'm trying to keep it like that, trying to keep it ambiguous. Cos I think it's the best for people. I love the surprise as well.

BB: Yes when you came running in, with that bloody cape and those bloody lycra tights, I lost my shit and I didn't regain it for the entire show. Now, um where were we.. look I'm going to keep coming back to how much I loved your show. Kind of punctuate the interview with that.

LH: And I hate that. Just quietly. It's really difficult to hear.

BB: Oh yes, ok, impulses... are there kind of fool-proof things, with your body.. cos you're at this point as you said the show works. And at some point I would love to see the actual text, cos I'm so interested in how people notate physical comedy. But I was wondering if there were certain things that you did with your body, that you go "I know this is going to work, this is going to get a laugh".

LH: Good question... eye contact. Really really looking at people. That works. Cos people never expect that. Not necessarily for a laugh. BUT it makes the whole room "happen". Something very good happens when I do that. That's the most powerful thing I've found. Actually looking at people. It's really powerful on the stage. And actually it keeps me very grounded. Because if I know I have to look at people, I can't disappear in my own arse in my performance, because I'm going to see in their eyes, "what are you doing?" It just connects you directly and it's very physical. So that always. The physicality of the characters, that's quite dangerous, if I fix that too much, it has to come from my pleasure of performing them..

BB: Yes, so you kind of find them every night.

LH: Yeah. I know how they move, I know what their rhythm is. And physically they're very stylised. So it's easy to find my way back there. But it has to come from the pleasure of doing the physicality. Not just from the physicality, otherwise the characters become really crispy or annoying, or you can't engage with them. And I think this show only works when we engage.

BB: Yes, I agree. I loved the almost painful honesty of the most clowny clown – that would be the way I would describe her. She was the one who I saw flop and really clearly do it, and really clearly engage. She was almost quite hunched and forward with the face – and I guess what I'm trying to get to with my research, is the kind of body shape that we laugh at..

LH: Oh, yeah, I think the reason we laugh at her is because she's such an optimistic idiot. She's such a loser. She's just socially really awkward. But she's giving it her best go! And that is very endearing. And she doesn't understand things, she never quite gets it, she's always like "am I missing the joke".

BB: Yeah and we see that. To relate that back to your earlier point about following impulses. For me that was very clear in your body. All of that stuff I read immediately in your body. There was text in the show, but not a massive amount.

LH: Well, quite a lot I think. It's quite stylised. It's just that everyone's delivering little talks, or poems or songs. Until at the end, when they begin to speak, then that's different, they begin to talk.

BB: Yeah, when they're conversing with each other. There's also something that I particularly loved about the central artist figure, who was, I guess the more neutral of the three, or four if you count the old woman. Maybe that was my favourite moment.

LH: Yeah, lots of people tell me that – she's their favourite. And she only appears four times. Probably got less than a minute of stage time overall.

BB: And what's wonderful about her is the attempt at the characterisation, and everything that she represents. "I am woman, and I am going to talk about the condition of womanhood." I am going to pretend to be an old woman. It's almost as if you can see the actor going: "I'm gonna do it. ... and that's all I've got. I didn't think about anything else, but I've just got this great character." John Wright says we love the parody when we see the person peeping out from behind it. It's not 100 percent otherwise it would be a photograph. You know we see the actor with the parodic intent and that's why we laugh. So... any other strategies or techniques that you can thing of?

LH: Yeah.. that old woman character. She's funny every time. I think she gets a laugh every time, but I think she's funny because of the placement. She's not funny in and of herself necessarily. First of all I'm going to show what woman is.. and there's this old woman, who's completely lost, and then comes back and she comes the second time when it's like who's controlling who... and then it's like the old woman... what am I doing here. And then it's the end, and we all have to join in and the old woman comes and it's like "I didn't realise you were still there" and it's like "I... don't know what.. I am". And it's like the very end under the scarf and it's just to give the signifier and everyone is so happy to recognise her, she's back again. All of those gags are about the placement of that puppet, of about that little thing, not about her, I think.

BB: It's a lovely shape, though on stage.

LH: Right, because we all know this, she's like classic old woman.

BB: For me, it was the hand. (the hand is in a gnarled, clasping position – clasping nothing in particular, outstretched from the body for no particular reason)

LH: I wanted to do it so much, because I thought I can't have a scarf and not do a character who looks like that. That's what you want to do with a scarf. But I think it's more about the placement than the physicality.

BB: Ok... so when you're creating a character, is it the physicality that comes first?

LH: Yeah. Someone told me a great technique, from when I studies corporeal mime in Paris. We used to go to the Louvre, and look at statues and try to be them physically. And then see who they are. If you put your body like that, how does it move? How does it speak? Who is it? And then see what they say?

BB: So it's coming from the body.

LH: Yeah, it's of the body. This one (character from the show – the idiot referred to earlier), started off binding my knees together and strapping my arms to my body at the elbow. And she had a lisp, a really grotesque character – but it was too much, too hard, and then it was... "I'm gonna take off this so she can walk a bit (the binding round her legs) and I'm gonna take off this (the binding round her arms) so she can move her arms". But she kept her arms down there anyway most of the time.

BB: Right, so restricting the body to play. That's interesting.

LH: Yeah. Then I got rid of the lisp. So and then she was a woman. But still a really strange one, and all of that physicality developed from there. Because you have to use your hands if you've only got the forearms to play with. This one (Birgid, the continental, passionate character), it comes just from the joy of doing the pose (a triumphant, arms wide, chest out pose). And then what can be done with it. And the same as this one, (the original "artist" character, with palms out to the audience) she just has to wear her scarf and she's open, cos that's what she wants to be.

BB: Yeah. What I also love was the mixture of working in broad brush strokes physically but also working in detail. Moving from one single totemic gesture, so "right, I get that character". Plus there was some lovely detailed work. For you, do you start big, and then work into the detail?

LH: I dunno. I don't know where it starts. What I love is the tiny gesture on the stage. Cos it's very visible.

BB: Yes.. the magnified nature of the stage.

LH: It starts with a fixed point, which is really difficult for me to do, to not move on stage. But when you do it, it's so powerful. You compel a fixed point and it's massive, everyone sees you when you do that, and understands what it means. And gets delighted, it's delightful. And I think to be aware, in every bit of my body that I'm on the stage and every bit of the body is working. There's no.. oh I'll just do that because nobody can see me, there's no off. Everything is on. And that's something that I learnt through clown. Clown is always in the room. So it's not a performance, it just is. So then, those characters, and I wanted to give the effect that they are just really there. They're in the room. So the only way I can do that is to just really be there. Really there in the room. All the way in. Otherwise you won't buy it, and I'll feel stupid.

BB: Yeah, you have to go there. Now because I'm interested in gender and physical comedy and I want to qualify what I'm going to say here. Some female physical comedians have been concerned, and said, are you just going to run an experiment and prove all over again that men are funnier than women blah blah... And of course that's the antithesis of what I want to do. But look at the numbers – there are just more men than women making comedy, and I just want to know why. But I know that there are women doing it, and doing it brilliantly. So the question for the thesis is – what are these strategies that these successful women are using in comedy, and how can I replicate them as a director/ facilitator for other performers? So I guess that's a longwinded way to introduce my question which is how does the gender of a performer affect what they're doing in physical comedy?

LH: Right, yeah. Massively! I think something that may or may not be overlooked is that women are confronted with their self image every day. Just by the nature of the media and the press and the nature of women's bodies. And the woman's body is objectified more because it's nicer, you know it's like, it always has been and I don't even have any clear perspective on that I just know that it is the case. Then as women, we always have our self image present with us, following us around, in a way that men don't nearly as much. They just don't. If they do, ok, if they don't it's fine. If a woman doesn't have her self image it's a bit weird. Like, these days, it's been a real pleasure to just not put on any make up on, not do my hair and just go out looking the way I want, and it's a bit subversive. Right?!? So that's a massive, massive part of it. It's really difficult for women to be liberated from their idea of what beauty is, their own image of how beautiful they are, because it's based on make up or gestures of beauty. This tour, actually, I worked quite a lot on the idea of beauty, because I wanted to make something beautiful, because ideally, what I'd really like to do is to be able to show beauty and all the other colours as well, because beauty is a thing that can be done. It's learned. It's an acting thing. Because all humans are beautiful, when they show themselves. So this notion of beauty that we have, you can do it. Anyone can do it.

BB: It's a performance.

LH: Exactly! So it can be performed, exactly that. So I think that's a massive thing for women to get over, and some women do, some women play with it. Some women go fuck it – a really important thing is to accept your ugliness. That's hard, but that's good. When you accept how ugly you are, then you're free, because then you can be beautiful and ugly, but you have to accept the thing you're most afraid of which is that you're ugly. I reckon. When I could go (speaking of herself) you are so ugly, I could go. Then I'm not and then I'm everything.

BB: YES! Interviewer slightly weeps at the revelations that are occurring! Wow, for it to be subversive for us to say I don't really care what I look like, and I don't care what other people think of what I look like, I just am, how fucked is that!

LH: I have to show you a picture actually that's on Facebook. The performance I did on Friday night at the Briefs show. Which was – I'm wearing just some men's pants. And I have eyeliner drawn on my chest, and I've a moustache and I did I will survive like a man and the picture are really shocking, and I can't tag them, they're too hard, they're too hardcore. But they're great, I love it. But it's too extreme, I look like a skinny Spanish guy, which is gorgeous. But me, as a performer, that's too far, I can't have people seeing that. If it's tagged on Facebook it makes me look way more subversive and edgy than I actually am.

BB: And it becomes about the drag stuff.

LH: Which I'm interested to do, but I think it just gives the wrong impression. I mean there's a lot of people on there who might give me gigs. And I wanted to say another thing about that. I did that "I will survive" piece again, and it was in this gorgeous shoulderless floor length evening gown, and there were black gloves and black heels. It was a bit ridiculous but gorgeous, very beautiful. And I entered onto the stage and said to everyone: "I am a beautiful woman". And be happy in it, and then just show a bit of doubt or whatever, and just did it the first time I did it was that it felt really subversive, how fucking absurd it was that to walk onto stage and say, I am a beautiful woman, felt subversive, right, that was like, WOW so there's loads more I want to explore around that, the notion of beauty. Like how to play it, how to disappear it, how to work with that. If I was a woman, I'd be happy to see that, if I wasn't doing it.

BB: I would be too. Yes and yes. Thank you so much for sharing that, that's incredible. I think you got to the heart of it, which is in your opinion it's that ever present, unshakeable little goblin of awareness of self-image.

LH: (softly) woman has to be beautiful

BB: And a certain type of beautiful.

LH: And the point is that what is fucked is that I remember going to Iceland, and there were some hot springs and everyone was there in the showers, this big row of women in the showers, and all the bodies were different shapes and everyone was so beautiful, it was so beautiful. Time and time again I'm like "why do we not believe? Why do we make our bodies into monsters? Change them. Why don't we think we're beautiful?"

BB: Why don't we think it's enough that we think we're beautiful?

LH: Why don't WE think we're beautiful?

BB: Because it doesn't make money? That's one theory. Because we then wouldn't spend money on cosmetics

LH: But also maybe because we don't try to be beautiful more, so then we just get stuck..

BB: ... on the surface, rather than inside.

LH: Inside we're like (makes distressed swirly noise) but then we're like, "why isn't this working", because, we just need to chill out, be happy in there. And then you'll be alright. Or something, I dunno

BB: and surely, as you say, when you really connect with someone.. we're going to deeper lands now, but that's okay, to be honest I don't even notice what people look like when I'm really talking to them, you know, if I do it's in a positive way. To be honest if I know them really well, I struggle to know what they look like, cos I'm just trying to be with them. That's something I've certainly struggled with in my own experience. A vague theory that I'm kind of fermenting away throughout this study is that often women feel, because there's all that going on that women sometimes feel that they have to over-compensate, like I can't just be myself, I can't just be present in that way that you're talking about. And the reason I absolutely loved your work so much was because I felt I saw you onstage. All the male clowns I have seen over the years saying through their work, "it's enough for me to be here" and that's the sense I got when I was watching you: "it's enough for me to be here." It's more than enough, it's just me. And that's what I'm aiming for, that technique, that mode of being if that makes sense, is what we as female clowns and comedians need to aim for.

LH: But I think the elephant, the blind spot, is that a lot of male teachers don't appreciate that women struggle with beauty, they're like "look, you're blocked here, you're blocked here, with their students" and they don't know that of course they're blocked, because they're living with that [the struggle with beauty]. So it's cool, everybody's living with things, guys are living with different pressures, the point is let's just identify that. Let's liberate that, and then it's go, it's not like women have it so bad – everyone has it so bad, it's just that's a particular struggle, let's liberate it.

BB: Yes! So you treat it maybe, as a block that you would treat any block in clowning.

LH: Of course! It's no bigger or smaller.

BB: And we identify it and say what can we do to get rid of it.

LH: I went into classes where some girls never took their makeup off, in acting classes. You have to be able to have nothing to show many things. And beauty isn't in the makeup, the make-up's just there to enhance the thing that let the beauty out. Dallas is very interesting, Dallas Dellaforce. You should go to the Briefs night on Friday – the new member of their thing. He's a drag performer. Gorgeous. Beautiful. And he wears extreme drag makeup. Lips, eyelashes and it just frames beauty. And it's extraordinary. His work's extraordinary. In terms of beauty. And another thing I wanted to say to you. Charlize Theron in Monster, that's a great example – of a gorgeous actress playing ugly. And she's a great actress and she just nails it, and it's very liberating and then you see her in a perfume advert. And I read an interview with her once, were someone said you know you expose your body a lot. And she was like, I work hard on my body, of course I get it out. And I was like Right on, why should she be ashamed? It's gorgeous. What's wrong with being beautiful?

Sue Broadway responses to The Vaudeville Hour

- What are some of the strategies of physical comedy that you use in your work?

Stillness. Repetition. Exaggeration. Ridiculous behaviours. The grotesque. Deadpan. Eccentric movement patterns. Breasts and Bum. Teeeeth. Facial exaggeration. Object manipulation work especially surprises and odd results. Inventive Costumes. Isolations – ie movement that separates actions by different parts of the face and body in time. When working as a director I try to get performers to exploit the specifics of their own bodies, qualities and skills. In other words to avoid generalisation and discover what is specifically funny about THEM and THIS SITUATION. Things are only funny if they are true – however unlikely.

- What are some strategies of physical comedy that you identify in the work of others?

All of the above. Plus highly skilled mime based illusion. Acrobatic ingenuity. Slapstick. Nakedness, physical idiosyncrasy (i.e tall, short, fat, funny legs, pot belly, bald….), social embarrassment and its consequent behaviours. Mock violence.

- How, in your view, does the gender of the performer impact on these strategies, if at all?

Choices that in men are funny are sometimes grotesque in women. Sex and nakedness have different meanings for men and women and transgendered performers. Enacted Pain is often unacceptable to an audience when pretended by a woman but funny when performed by a man. The meaning is also understood differently depending on the audience – so a "straight" audience will find a man in a dress hilarious where a "fringe" audience may not. To be acceptable as funny by many audiences a woman must be non-threatening – so femininity, cuteness, childishness are often used by women in the mainstream. That said, exceptionally funny people are funny and can get away with just about anything – Lucille Ball, Phyllis Diller, Jennifer Saunders, Carole Burnett, Julie Forsyth, Magda Szubanski, Jane Turner, Gina Riley……

- How, in your view, did gender impact upon the physical comedy in The Vaudeville Hour?

To be honest, one viewing of a work is not really enough to be able to answer this question in any depth. Clearly the two artists had a good rapport, and there was a strong interplay at various moments. The range of behaviour in the piece seemed constrained – I think they both have a lot further they can go in exploring the violent and the grotesque while still staying in the land of comedy. Without more knowledge of the process it is hard to know if this feeling derives from their genders or whether they just

need more time to explore. I think it is harder for women to work on stage with men – note the number of female solos and double acts…that said this is a frontier we need to keep pushing. Common model of funny man straight woman needs to be exploded.

- Were there moments in the show where the performers were able to share the punchlines?

Not sure what this means. Are you talking about status shifts? Funny/straight role swapping? The performers took it in turns more or less to be the comic focus – from memory Liz comes across as the dumb one more often but this could be just a first impression. Both have moments of the extremely silly and moments of reflecting the audience viewpoint of the others silliness back at us.

- What, in your view, are some of the key issues that impact upon female physical comedians?

Girls grow up in an environment of restraint – where correct behaviour and inhibition are learned from day one. This is the antitheses of physical comedy which is based in chaos and surprise. Learning to act on impulse, to trust misinterpretation, to think sideways, to be outrageous doesn't come easily or naturally to most women. (Or didn't? This may be different for younger women?)

Women are already parodies of themselves. Our behaviours are learned disguises. Comedy comes from the revelation of simple human truths in unlikely contexts. Too often women seek the comic in self-deprecation, instead of exploring inner confidence as the source. Loving yourself enables you to reveal more and through this openness comes real comedy.

Vanity is an issue – women are trained to judge themselves by visual aesthetic benchmarks which need to be ignored to allow broader exploration. That said – Buster Keaton was never anything less than beautiful. Is it possible for a woman to be beautiful and funny at the same time?

- How, in your view, can a director facilitate successful female physical comedy?

Where men are often competitive and produce their best and funniest work when challenged, women often need the exact opposite – a secure and supportive environment in which to play. A director who is able to create this energy and at the same time set up situations that encourage the female performer to explore the extremes of possibility will draw the best from the artist. Also a director needs to be able to encourage the male perfromers in the room to be really nasty or high status – so as to give the female comedian something to play against.